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The Magic in this Other
World is Too Far Behind! **6**

Characters



Liliana Zandyke

A former second lieutenant of the Imperial Army's intelligence division who was raised by her adoptive father, Colonel Rogue Zandyke.

Because of her supreme talent with dark magic and apparent lack of emotion, she became known as "the human weapon." Is now receiving treatment for the side effects of using dark magic from Suimei while accompanying him on his journey.



Lefille Grakis

A descendant of the royal family of the now destroyed nation of Noshias who carries on their special bloodline—she's part spirit. She receives oracles from the Church of Salvation every now and again, but is always left racking her brain over what to do with them. When she uses too much of the power of the spirits, her body ends up shrinking.



Felmenia Stingray

A genius mage in this world capable of developing new magics.

Initially prejudiced against Suimei, who she thought a coward for not accompanying Reiji on his quest.

When he saved her from a beast of the apocalypse, however, her opinion of him changed considerably.

After stepping down from her job as a court mage in Astel, she tracked Suimei down in the Empire.



Yakagi Suimei

Innocent victim and totally normal person who got caught up in his best friend Shana Reiji's hero summoning—or so he claims to be. In truth, he's a rather talented modern magician. Currently working to try to find a way home for him and his friends.



Titania Root Astel

Princess of the Kingdom of Astel who is accompanying Astel's summoned hero, Reiji, on his journey to vanquish the Demon Lord. She's really "Twilight" of the Seven Swords, known for her deadly skill with two blades. However, because she doesn't want to reveal herself to be a tomboy in front of the hero, she disguises her combat abilities and carries herself like a lady.



Anou Mizuki

A high school girl who was also caught up in Shana Reiji's hero summoning. Used to live her life as "Io Kuzami, Holy King of the Heavens," but that's all part of a dark past now. Being summoned to another world is actually fulfilling a lifelong dream for her, and she's currently in the middle of scheming to work out her own signature magic.



Shana Reiji

A high school boy chosen to be a hero by a special summoning ritual of this world. Possesses a hot-blooded zeal that prevents him from turning a blind eye to those in need. Currently on a quest to subjugate the Demon Lord. Specializing in Burn Boost magic that reinforces his physical abilities, he was given the title "Attribute Master" by the Mage's Guild.



Kuchiba Hatsumi

The summoned hero of the Saadias Alliance, and Suimei's childhood friend. However, due to an accident at the time of her summoning, she ended up losing her memories from before she was summoned to this world. Using a sword style called the Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, she defeated Demon General Vuishta with Suimei's help.



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Prologue: That Memory

“Dragons, you say?”

On that fateful evening, modern magician Yakagi Suimei heard the name of those infamous beings for the first time from the mouth of his father, Yakagi Kazamitsu.

Dragons—in the contemporary world of fiction and fantasy novels, they were creatures commonly understood to have reptilian bodies, wings on their backs, and the ability to breathe fire. Eastern dragons were considered a symbol of virtue, while in the West, they were terrible beings of destruction akin to the devil. They were malignancy incarnate. An evil opposed by God and all the angels.

Their reptilian nature came from what many consider to be the original monster—the snake. In biblical lore, it was a serpent that tempted Adam and Eve. Back in ancient times, religions of the book came into conflict with the indigenous religions of Egypt, which revered and worshipped snakes. Ever after, the serpent was seen in the eyes of Western religion as a symbol of evil, if not outright the devil himself. Dragons were a manifestation of that, and universally reviled as an enemy of both good and mankind.

Needless to say, Suimei was quite surprised to hear his father casually ask out of nowhere: “Do you know about dragons?” Suimei had heard of them, certainly, but he was nowhere near as knowledgeable as his father. After confirming he’d heard him correctly, Suimei shook his head as he sat on the couch to encourage his father to explain.

“Evidence of dragons has been left behind in history books and literature from all around the world, but their actual existence is not recognized. It is something that we magicians conceal.”

“Conceal?”

“In other words...”

Suimei frowned at his father stopping midsentence. Kazamitsu, meanwhile, tapped the armrest of his wheelchair with his index finger to prompt Suimei to figure out the rest for himself.

“They really do exist, right?”

“Though it’s all old history now.”

Like usual, his father was gazing out the window at the cloudy sky as he spoke. Suimei waited to hear what he would say next, but it wasn’t quite what he expected.

“Suimei, make some coffee,” Kazamitsu said, turning to his son.

“Right in the middle of this talk?”

“I suddenly wanted some. Now help an old man out. It’s a parent’s privilege to have your children make coffee for you every now and then.”

“What kind of privilege is that...? Is it fine if it’s instant?”

“I don’t mind, but...”

“Black, right? Got it.”

“Are you also having some?”

“With milk and sugar.”

“Get used to drinking it black already.”

“All in due time.”

Suimei flashed a small smile at his father, whose expression hadn’t changed at all. His father’s face was always stony, though it wasn’t for lack of emotion; he’d simply lost the ability to express it outwardly. It was evident from his words that he still had a good sense of humor and knew how to joke around lightheartedly, though only anyone close to him would ever be able to tell.

“So, what’s this about dragons? You said magicians are hiding their existence, right?”

“That’s right. The fewer who know about them, the better. That was the idea, but things have changed.” After pausing there to take a sip of his coffee, Kazamitsu continued, “The Akashic Seer indicates that a dragon will appear in Europe. It will be a mystical calamity on a scale larger than any known to history.”

The Akashic Seer was a vessel used by the Thousand Nights Association to predict phenomena around the world. It could foresee anything from the inconsequential to the cataclysmic. In simple terms, it was an instrument for seeing the future... though its true nature was more complex than that.

“A mystical calamity on a scale larger than any known to history...?”

“Heh, it’s a vague way of describing it, isn’t it? But the scale is the important part—it’s only a matter of time before it’s known to all magicians. So at this point, keeping it hidden is rather pointless. Because the last survivors of the dragons were wiped out thirty

years ago, dragons will not ever be born into this world again.”

“Then how is it that one is going to appear?”

“The answer to that... is twilight syndrome. An unexpected outbreak of instability at a certain location in Spain will become an A-grade disturbance on a grand scale. From there, a beast will manifest, and the prediction is that it will likely take the form of a dragon.”

“A beast...”

A beast—short for a beast of the apocalypse. It was a manifestation of twilight syndrome. An apparition. Suimei still wasn’t clear on all the details, but he knew that they were entities that appeared to accelerate the world towards its end by annihilating all living beings. They were concepts that took the form of monsters in order to bring about the apocalypse.

Most of them manifested as C-grade beings that were something like a mix of a dog and wolf. In the much rarer case that an A-grade being appeared, it would naturally manifest in the form of something deeply feared by all. In Europe, it was easy to imagine one taking the form of what was considered to be the ultimate evil: a dragon.

“But if that gets out into the world...”

“There would be tremendous casualties in Europe. No, it probably wouldn’t just stop there.”

A calamity the likes of which the world had never known. And on top of that, it would take the form of a dragon. It would take nothing short of a hero of legend to defeat it. But alas, the modern world was without a Saint George or Saint Sylvester to come to its aid. If they made a blunder in dealing with it, it very well may spell the end of the world.

“Then you must have...” Suimei said, looking at his father.

“Indeed. I was called for the gathering. This time around, twenty magicians were chosen to take part in the dragon subjugation, and an elite few are going in to defeat it.”

“Who’s leading the operation?”

“The Thousand Nights Association. The group is unified under the eldest daughter of the Cattleya family, representative of the Enforcers of the Thousand Nights Association, Formelkress. Aiding her will be her younger sister, Zealkis.”

“The two strongest Enforcers in history are leading...?”

“On paper. In truth, the duty of leading all the magicians on-

site will be left to someone else. Though those two girls will be extremely helpful in the battle against the dragon...”

Kazamitsu quietly trailed off at the end. He’d mentioned the Cattleya sisters, who were the current powerhouses of the Thousand Nights Association’s Enforcement Agency. They both used magicka that manipulated time, and were said to have strength unequaled in battle. But because they were still only in their early twenties, even if they were given charge of the operation, they would end up handing over command to the more experienced magicians on-site. For Suimei, who was still as lowly ranked as a mere philosopher, this entire conversation was simply in another dimension.

“A dragon, the best of the best of the Enforcement Agency... It’s all quite an amazing story. I’ve been to Europe plenty of times, but it still feels so far away...”

“No. You can’t think of this like it’s not your problem too.”

Confused at the meaning behind his father’s words, Suimei raised a befuddled eyebrow.

“Huh? What do you mean by—”

“In the prediction, the Akashic Seer revealed several possibilities. Including the outbreak of a dragon, Europe’s destruction, countless deaths, and the world ultimately racing towards the apocalypse. Naturally, because those are only possibilities, that means it’s possible to prevent them.”

After skirting the heart of the matter, Suimei’s father finally revealed why he’d started this conversation.

“And in order to do that, the final piece of guidance given to us by the vessel was you, Suimei. You are to be brought along without fail.”

Suimei stared blankly into his father’s keen eyes, then, after a long moment’s pause, let out a shrill yelp.

“M-ME?!”

“That’s right. The actual reason for that has not been made clear yet, but it likely means that your power will become the key to fighting the dragon.”

Yakagi Kazamitsu spoke of this most serious matter with his usual stoic, unchanging expression. Nevertheless, though it was just a flash, Suimei was able to catch a glimpse of the proud emotions welling up inside him. His son’s power would be integral in the battle to come. He was happy about that, but as expected, all of this was a bolt out of the blue for Suimei.

“To be honest, I can’t help but think I’ll be completely useless. As a magician, I’m pretty low-ranking...”

“You simply have not been bestowed a proper rank yet. I’m certain that I’ve trained you to be capable. You’re also confident in your own abilities, are you not?”

“I can fight as a magician, for sure. I’ve followed along with all your battles, after all. You’ve even taught me about dealing with mystical calamities and such. But when it comes to fighting alongside high-ranking magicians, I’m still anxious...”

Suimei’s voice quietly trailed off at the end. Really, it was perfectly natural for him to feel pressure under such circumstances. Regardless of whether they were foes or allies, there was a magic law known as “rank disparity extinction” that came into play when low-ranking and high-ranking magicians shared the battlefield. Low-ranking magicka would always be shut down by high-ranking magicka. Effectively, it was made extinct within the domain of a high-ranking magician.

Such a phenomenon, however, would not occur unless there was a particularly remarkable discrepancy between the ranks of the magickas involved. And because the conditions for it to occur were so specific, it generally wasn’t anything to be worried about. But knowing that he would be in a group with some of the most powerful magicians there were, it would inevitably be an issue.

If they made concessions for Suimei and purposefully kept from using high-ranking magicka so as not to trigger rank disparity extinction, it would be a serious problem. They would be facing a dragon, after all. Everyone involved would need to give it everything they had. Certainly the high-ranking magicians present shouldn’t waste their time worrying about a low-ranking magician like Suimei. It would be one thing if he could use support magicka where there would be no risk of triggering rank disparity extinction, but Suimei didn’t think the support magicka he could use would even be of any help to high-ranking magicians of this caliber. So it wasn’t like he could just smile, nod, and agree to going.

Kazamitsu shut his eyes and sighed before answering Suimei’s anxieties.

“The reason you’re doubting yourself right now might be the fault of how I raised you. Kiyoshiro has told me I’m quite guilty in that regard.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Frankly speaking, it means I’ve been overly strict. Short of the truly spectacular, I’ve never really praised you, have I?”

“Um... Well... No, not really...”

Kazamitsu had taught Suimei magic himself. But even when Suimei had shown remarkable potential and progress, Kazamitsu never offered much in the way of praise. That was fact. But Suimei had never thought much of it, and had simply chalked it up to his father’s taciturn disposition. Which was why he didn’t understand what his father was getting at now.

“Suimei. You can use large-scale magicka, can’t you?”

“Huh? Yes, of course. You were the one that told me any self-respecting modern magician had to be able to use at least one large-scale spell. Although, taking into account the chanting speed, it would be rather difficult to use in actual battles...”

In order to keep up with his father’s training, Suimei had worked out a few such spells. Following along with his father’s intense battles, he’d even developed them to the point he could use them recently. But putting that into practice in actual combat was a completely different story.

“For the fight in Spain, the number of magicians who’ll have the ability to use large-scale magicka independently without a major ritual will total five at most—both you and I included.”

“So other than those two from the Enforcement Agency, there aren’t all that many strong magicians coming? Even though we’re talking a beast that could destroy all of Europe?”

“Aah, no, that’s not what I meant... Hmph, to think that my faults as a teacher would be so glaring after all this time...”

Suimei generally felt like he understood his father fairly well, despite his inscrutable demeanor. But right now, he felt like nothing short of a mystery. But the simple fact that Suimei was so stumped as to what Kazamitsu really meant only highlighted the problem further.

Currently, even compared to other high-ranking magicians, Suimei was more than equipped enough to join the fight against the dragon. However, since Kazamitsu had always hated the idea of Suimei becoming a magician filled with self-conceit, he’d been especially hard on him as his teacher.

Kazamitsu had never properly explained to Suimei that he was following in the footsteps of an exceptionally skilled magician. In short, that he was being held to a near impossible standard.

Suimei's father had originally wanted him to live a normal life. Like a normal boy, completely ignorant to the world of magicka. But once he crossed that line, his father took his training very seriously. Perhaps too seriously. And that was now the source of Suimei's confusion. He thought all of that had been normal.

But nevertheless, he had gained great strength from it. Kazamitsu was proud of him—both as his father and as a magician. Any of the magicka organizations would have gladly welcomed someone of Suimei's talent. The only problem was that Suimei had no idea.

It could be said that Kazamitsu had gone too far in trying to quash all self-conceit in his blossoming magician of a son. Nearly the opposite had grown in its place. Suimei was now victim to a critical lack of self-awareness. How exactly that would affect him in the future would be up to him to handle. But for now...

"You'll understand everything if you go," said Kazamitsu. "That being said, don't lose your focus. This battle will likely be the greatest challenge you ever face."

"...Yes, sir."

Suimei nodded to his father, and after the two of them were finished with their coffee, he stood up and took their mugs to the sink. As he stared at the water rushing out of the faucet, he realized a sense of discomfort was washing over him.

"A dragon, huh...?"

He could feel an ominous tingling on the back of his neck like it was being singed. It grew into a burning, pulsating sensation as it assailed him. From what his father had told him, it was a power that he'd inherited from his mother. Though Suimei had no way of knowing what it meant at the time.

It could be said this was the day magician Yakagi Suimei's battle truly started.

Chapter 1: The Dragonnewt in the Moonlight

The utter stillness of the darkwood forest was like a barrier that prevented any and all from entering. But amidst it erupted a thunderous roar, a cacophony of whipping winds, and a light so bright that it would burn one's eyes just to look at it.

Right after Suimei and Hatsumi defeated Demon General Vuishta, the dragonnewt Eanru had appeared suddenly and fired off a dragon's roar. It was the source of the disturbance, and in its wake, the trees of the forest were reduced to ash. All that was left were smoldering fires here and there. The scene was completely unrecognizable from mere moments ago, and the fiery blast undulated under the night sky like red waves of dawn.

The only two things left standing were Suimei and Hatsumi. Everything else had been blown away by the power of the dragon's roar. Even the ruins of the hero summoning ritual that Suimei had been looking for were incinerated without a trace.

Both of their gazes fell on Eanru, who stood above the flames. By looks, he appeared to be a young man. Perhaps even an intellectual. He had a slender, elegant figure and stylish bangs falling down onto his shoulders. He could have easily been mistaken for an aristocrat who knew nothing of the ways of battle, but in truth, he held enough power in one hand to blow away a group of demons and his feet were firmly planted on the spot like the roots of a great, ancient tree.

His strength and fighting spirit belied his appearance. He simply radiated power, exerting an intimidating pressure on everything around him. Hatsumi held her sword aimed at his head as the dancing flames licked at her golden hair. Without relenting a single ounce of her vigilant guard, she sharpened her green eyes like a blade and questioned Eanru.

"You expect me to come with you...?"

"That's right. I cannot reveal the reason yet, but I need your

power.”

“I’m sorry to inform you the power of a single girl like me doesn’t amount to much.”

“That might be true if we were talking about your strength alone. However, you have another power within you, no?”

It sounded like he was implying the divine blessing bestowed upon the hero. But just what did he need a hero’s power for...?

“Based on how things went just now,” said Hatsumi, “it doesn’t look like you need it in order to defeat the demons, right?”

“Naturally. Those guys are completely secondary. If all goes according to plan, they’re fated to disappear soon enough anyway.”

Eanru spoke fearlessly. Though he claimed to need the power of a hero, it seemed his goal had nothing to do with why the heroes had been summoned in the first place.

“Frankly speaking, you’re just too suspicious,” said Hatsumi. “What’s with threatening to take me with you regardless of whether or not I consent?”

“Because to us, it’s necessary.”

“Don’t you think it’s normal to build up trust beforehand?”

“I never had any delusions about sweet talking you into coming with me. Don’t misunderstand; I have no intentions of treating you politely. I don’t particularly care whether you consent or not.”

“So you’re going to kidnap me? What exactly do you intend on doing with me?”

“I told you that I cannot reveal the details... But, really, it’s nothing much. We have a use for you, and we plan on doing exactly that—using you.”

“Tch, treating people like they’re objects...”

Listening to Eanru talk, a sneer crept across Hatsumi’s face. Anyone would have their feathers ruffled by being so blatantly told that they would be used. Meanwhile, Suimei—who was standing in front of Hatsumi to protect her—looked directly at Eanru with his piercing red eyes and cut into their conversation.

“Aren’t you supposed to keep the shady stuff to yourself and at least *try* saying something to get her to come along with you of her own free will? Isn’t that the established tactic?”

“Indeed, you have a point there. But the fact of the matter is that we *will* use the hero one way or another. I have no intention of leading you to believe otherwise.”

“Ballsy...”

Despite plainly announcing that he wouldn't reveal his motivations, Eanru was surprisingly frank about his intentions. Suimei wrinkled his brow at this somehow incongruous conversation.

"Though before that... You come first," Eanru said, turning towards Suimei as if the hero were merely a secondary objective. "Man in black, I would like to hear your name."

"Mine?"

"That's right. The name of the man who splendidly defended against my roar... I simply must know it."

Eanru's unwavering eyes gleamed like emeralds as they looked right at Suimei.

"Is that so?"

"Asking an opponent's name is a courtesy reserved for the strong. Don't tell me you plan on giving me a boring answer like, 'I have no name worth giving.'"

As he implied that such a reply would be an utter disappointment, Eanru unleashed a raging torrent of fighting spirit. However, as a magician, Suimei was well accustomed to proper etiquette before a fight. And since he had no reason to refuse, Suimei introduced himself.

"Magician of the Society, Yakagi Suimei... Though I guess you guys would say Suimei Yakagi?"

For some reason, Eanru's eyebrow twitched when he heard those words.

"Did you just say Suimei Yakagi?"

"Uh, yeah?"

Baffled by Eanru's reaction, Suimei was wondering what was wrong with his name. Eanru, on the other hand, suddenly dispelled the overwhelming aura of power radiating from his body.

"I see. So you were the one who did in Romeon..."

"What?"

"I believe I owe you both a thank you and an apology. To do so while postured for battle would be inappropriate."

It didn't seem like there was an ounce of fighting spirit left in Eanru as he spoke. But that wasn't what had caught Suimei's attention.

"I'm sorry, I may have misheard you, but did you just say Romeon?"

"That's right. The elf Romeon. The one who served as a

librarian in the Imperial University Library. I mean exactly the man you're thinking of."

Eanru confirmed Suimei's bewildered suspicion. Hatsumi was completely lost as to what they were talking about, but even Suimei—who'd known Romeon—had no idea what Eanru was getting at.

"A thank you and an apology... about that guy?"

"The incident that Romeon caused in the Empire... I heard you were the one that handled it. So for putting a decisive end to the depravity of a fellow member of the organization I belong to, I would like to thank you on everyone's behalf."

And then, with a light bow of his head reminiscent of a nod...

"We are in your debt."

"...In other words, that guy was one of your companions?"

"That's right. He's a comrade aiming for the same ideals as the rest of us. Or rather, he was."

He already considered his camaraderie with Romeon a thing of the past. But hearing mention of Romeon's name at all, Suimei's distrust towards Eanru only grew stronger. Suimei knew that Romeon had had honest desires before he was touched by darkness, but...

"I don't really get it, but if that's how you feel, you should've kept a much tighter hold on his leash. There's no nice way to put it. That guy was beyond saving, you know?"

"You're precisely right. I can't say anything in our defense. His will— No, our failure to see that he had been taken in by the darkness was sheer oversight on our part."

"Based on the way you're talking, that uproar wasn't your real goal, was it?"

"By and large, it is exactly as you say. Though, naturally, I mean the harm that befell that young girl rather than what happened in the city."

In other words, the incidents in the Empire were something he—no, from the way he spoke, it was "they"—stood to gain from. It sounded like what had happened to everyone but Liliana and Rogue was...

"It seems I may have said too much."

"I wouldn't mind if you kept going, honestly."

"I'll have to refrain. Your intuition is too keen. Even in the midst of panicking, you are still shrewd."

Eanru directed a sharp gaze at Suimei as he spoke. It seemed

he'd completely seen through Suimei. But then Eanru sighed and shook his head as though lamenting something regrettable.

"We were originally going to dispose of Romeon ourselves. However, before we could make our move, you ended up defeating him. We cannot even pay you back."

Those words came across as a mere excuse after all this time, but with the way he sighed... It truly did sound like he was ashamed and embarrassed at his own shortcomings. But there was something else that had piqued Suimei's interest.

"I get what you're saying about what happened with Romeon, but how do you know that I defeated him? There shouldn't have been anybody present observing us at the library that night."

"Let's simply say our ability to gather information is just that good."

They were bold words. But, just as he said, there was clearly no mistaking the strength of their intelligence network. Suimei knew better than anyone else there was hardly any evidence of what had happened that night at the library. Having heard enough, however, Suimei lightly shrugged his shoulders as he spoke up once more.

"Well, if you're so grateful for what I did, could you maybe just step aside?"

"I refuse. Not only is there the hero to retrieve, but now I've taken an interest in you too. In the power you hold that overwhelmed Romeon after he fell into darkness."

"Ugh, come on... Give me a break already."

Eanru turned a ferocious grin on Suimei like a predator that had found its prey. Just like Graziella—or perhaps even more so than her—he was the type who found enjoyment in battle. A dragon. A battle maniac. He was Suimei's least favorite kind of person to deal with, right behind lunatics. Seeing Suimei grimace like he was biting down on something bitter, Eanru narrowed his eyes and curiously observed him.

"I don't really understand, but what has you so frightened? If you hold that much power, then there should be no reason for such cowardice. How strange."

"Mind your own business. I've got my own baggage to deal with."

"Is that so...? Very well. Either way, it's about time we begin. Now, how will you do this? I don't mind if you both come at me together, you know."

“So it’s a totally foregone conclusion that we’re going to fight?”

“Based on our little talk, it’s clear that the young hero has no intention of quietly coming along with me. That being the case, is it not evident that I must now take her along by force?”

“...”

“There’s no need to make such a grim face. If you don’t like it, then all you have to do is win against me. It’s as simple as that.”

Eanru gave a rather matter-of-fact reply to Suimei’s scowling, and then once more fearlessly unleashed his fighting spirit.



Even though the whole ordeal centered on her, the exchange between Suimei and Eanru had completely left Hatsumi behind. All she could do was hold on to the anger in her heart the same way she did the blade in her hand, which she kept aimed at the new enemy standing before her.

That enemy was the dragonnewt named Eanru. He’d quite plainly demanded that she come with him, though he wouldn’t say why, and the aftermath had devolved into a fight. But the one bearing the full brunt of this man’s fighting spirit was Suimei. He’d broken out into a cold sweat the moment Eanru showed up. He looked like he was suddenly confronted with someone he’d never wanted to see again. He hadn’t shown a single sign of anxiousness in their fight with Vuishta, but Hatsumi could see it dominating his heart now. His index and middle fingers were restlessly rubbing against each other as he fixedly kept his gaze on Eanru.

“Yakagi, I’ll take the front,” she said from behind him.

If they couldn’t avoid battle, she thought their strategy should stay the same. She would leave support to him on the rear line while she acted as the vanguard. It was a solid plan for a mage and swordsman duo. However, Suimei seemed to think otherwise.

“No. Not this time. Step back,” he said sharply without so much as turning to look at her.

“What are you saying? Aren’t you acting like this exactly because he’s an intimidating opponent? So wouldn’t it be better to fight together?”

“...”

“Hey, Yakagi!”

“...Yeah, he’s an intimidating opponent all right. The kind that

dredges up the worst possible memories for me.”

After practically shouting in his ear out of irritation, she realized something from Suimei’s trembling voice. He wasn’t rubbing his fingers together out of restlessness. No, it was out of pure fear.

“Are you that scared?”

“Yeah, I am. You see, it was a dragon back then too.”

“Wait, do you mean when your father...”

“That’s right. We won that day, so I didn’t think I’d ever have to go through this again, but I was naive. And just at the thought that I might lose someone else, I can’t stop shaking.”

The reason Suimei was sweating and quaking in fear wasn’t because he was faced with a strong opponent. It was because he was faced with a deep-seated fear of loss. Rather than fearing defeat, he was afraid of what that defeat would cost him. But Hatsumi thought that was all the more reason for them to fight together. And as she was silently conveying that thought to him...

“No, it’s fine. Leave this one to me. This guy is different from that demon. He’s on a completely different level. If you still had your memories, it would be one thing. But if you can’t pull all of the Kuchiba techniques and dharani out from the depths of your mind, this guy will be far too much for you to handle.”

“But even so...”

“I only fought against those demons earlier, but you’ve been fighting all day, haven’t you? There was the incident at the fortress, and you had to defend yourself the whole time you were retreating. So even if you think you’re fine, your concentration is worn out.”

“That’s not...”

“True,” is what she was going to say, but Suimei cut her off.

“That’s my line. Now, seriously, how long has it been since you’ve taken your eyes off him?”

It wasn’t until he said that that Hatsumi realized it herself—she’d been completely focused on their conversation. If Eanru made a move while they were talking, she would have been slow to react. She might have even fallen to the first blow of the fight. And the simple fact that she couldn’t properly keep her guard up anymore told her that Suimei was right. Biting her lip, she relented. Without saying anything more, Suimei stepped forward. He looked like a knight in shining armor ready to protect her.

She had more to say, but the words would hardly leave her

mouth. As soon as she went to speak, her lips unconsciously shut tightly. It was the sight of the boy in front of her that had stolen her voice.

That manly figure shielding her from the fight looked just like what she'd seen so many times in her dreams. He was just much, much smaller then. But even so, he'd always looked manly to her. That hadn't changed.

"Ah..."

Indeed, this was just like her dreams—the memories she would recall while she was sleeping. He was always stepping forward to protect her from an incoming threat. This was the same boy she'd aspired to be like. He'd smiled so gently at her when he stood up to that dog. It was a small act of kindness, but a priceless one in her eyes. And thinking back on it, she recalled something important.

I hated being the one who always needed protecting. Isn't that why I became stronger?

"U-Urgh..."

At the sudden pain in her head, her knees buckled. There was a noise like a clap of thunder in her mind, and the next thing she heard was the sound of her knees hitting the ground. Perhaps suddenly recalling part of her memories had put a strain on her mind and body. But the question that had caused the shock in the first place had vanished into the ether. The next thing she knew, Suimei was talking to her.

"Hatsumi? What's wrong? Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah, it's nothing."

"Then get back... I'm begging you."

His pleading voice, though quiet, weighed heavily on her. It wasn't his words that were particularly compelling, but rather the desperate tone of his voice. Against that, she couldn't argue. Silently nodding back to him, Hatsumi drew back. As she did, Suimei finally looked a little relieved. And after she got a fair distance away, he turned his attention back towards Eanru.

"You sure waited for us patiently."

"It wouldn't be interesting to take you out with a surprise attack after all this buildup, would it? To thoroughly enjoy a fight, it's only proper to wait for it to begin fairly."

"Yeah, I don't get you at all. Despite having a mission you seemed so intent on, you're just completely neglecting it."

"No matter what battles a warrior may be forced to face, the

fighting itself must be done in a warrior's own style—no matter the cost. Is that not the case for you?"

Eanru spoke in a dignified tone, but Suimei kept up his provoking attitude.

"Magicians always try and catch their opponents off guard. Testing each other out is one thing, but in a fight to the death, there ain't no such thing as fair and square."

"So attacking an unguarded enemy is your style, is it? Certainly, that is similar to those mages who are unable to fight head-on. However, is that something you should be revealing before a fight?"

"Chew on it. Be wary of any and everything coming from me."

As Suimei went from quaking in his boots to baring his fangs, strange things began happening. Perhaps as evidence of the extreme instability of physical laws here, the air around him crackled with flashes of blue light here and there. Debris and soot floated up into the air and vanished as arcs of electricity bounced between them. And then everything started shaking. Hatsumi instinctively crouched to the ground like she would have during a severe earthquake. But standing tall amidst all the chaos was Suimei.

"Architatus overload."

Without being drowned out by the thunderous shaking, a chant with a mysterious echo to it rang in the air. Mere moments later, a rush of mana burst forth from Suimei's body. A powerful shockwave followed, as though there had been an actual explosion.

Hatsumi stabbed the tip of her sword in the ground and used it to support herself as she endured the blast. From her squinting eyes, she could see Suimei leap into the sky. Perhaps he was using magic that allowed him to fly, because he seemed to be able to freely control his movements in the air. After stabilizing himself like he'd flapped his imaginary wings in the wind a few times, from what Hatsumi could see, he came to a stop.

Seeing all this too, Eanru smiled, apparently amused at such an interesting technique. Even with his opponent claiming air superiority over him, he still seemed to have plenty of composure. Any ordinary combatant would have been at a considerable disadvantage under such circumstances, but just as Suimei had said, Eanru was on a completely different level. Common sense didn't apply here.

"What excellent mana. The last time my heart throbbed so much was back against the Man-Eating Evil."

Eanru smirked, and then, as if the two of them had arranged it beforehand, they both called out to each other.

“Here I go!”

“Come!”

As Eanru and Suimei’s voices overlapped, the curtain raised on their battle.

The first thing Hatsumi really saw was that Suimei completely defied her expectations. Based on the way they’d fought together earlier, she assumed he would try and keep his distance and make this a long-range firefight. It would be the safest, smartest thing for a mage.

But it was hardly the strategy Suimei chose. Though he could have easily targeted Eanru from the air with magic, he closed in on Eanru before firing a single spell. He was throwing away every advantage he had. Despite having more combat experience than him, she couldn’t understand what was going through his head.

It looked like he was just randomly zipping through the air this way and that. He would even sporadically land, but then immediately leap into the air again and do it all over. He would change course suddenly midair, fluttering briefly in place before tearing off in a different direction with no rhyme or reason. It was like he was trying to bewilder his opponent.

Meanwhile, Eanru was conducting himself with aplomb. At this rate, he could be attacked from any direction at any time. Knowing that, he kept on his toes. Every time Suimei entered one of his blind spots, he would immediately dodge accordingly. On top of that, Suimei was hammering him with low-powered magic to try and keep him in place, but it seemed to have no effect. Even when he took it head-on, there was hardly even a change in his expression.

And then there were his counterattacks. Waiting for Suimei, who was constantly firing short-range magic and drawing nearer, Eanru would leap for him the moment he landed. He moved with all the sharpness of a bird of prey diving on its target. He would come in from above like a flash of green lightning, only regaining human form right before he was about to strike. It was like he was some kind of storm god. This exchange repeated many times, and finally, the green bolt looked like it was just about to catch Suimei.

“Tch!”

As Suimei clicked his tongue, he snapped his fingers. The air in front of the approaching bolt exploded, but the bolt passed right

through it unfettered. Before Eanru's far too speedy attack, Suimei had no time to spin any words together. And without even a protective spell to shield him, Suimei took Eanru's open palm completely defenseless.

Just as expected, its destructive power was tremendous. Suimei, like a pinball launched by a spring-loaded plunger, was sent flying all the way to the distant line of trees that Eanru's opening roar hadn't devastated.

Watching all this unfold, Hatsumi audibly gasped. If Suimei didn't land properly, it would be fatal. But there was far more to Eanru's attack than that. The moment Suimei crashed into the ground, the surrounding darkwood trees and even the earth beneath him were turned to mere pulp.

"You're kidding..."

Hatsumi could hardly believe what she'd just seen. How could the boy who'd always saved her without fail be so easily defeated? Obstinate refusing to give in to despair, she stared hard into the cloud of dust and dirt that had been kicked up by the impact where he landed. But even when it settled, there was only destruction to be seen.

"YAKAGI!"

"Don't scream like that. I'm alive."

"Huh...?"

In response to her aggrieved cry, she heard an unexpected voice coming from an unexpected direction. When she turned towards it, standing there holding his stomach and leaning forward a bit... was Suimei. It looked like he was using magic to heal himself. Sweat was pouring from his brow, and a pale green light was coming out of the hand he had placed over his abdomen.

"Hmph. I thought I managed to get you with that one though," remarked Eanru.

"As expected, you can use the draconic eye, huh...?" replied Suimei.

"'As expected' should be my line. Knowing that, you moved around to try and escape my sight. Though, isn't it a little careless for you to stop to heal your wounds in the middle of battle?"

Eanru boldly offered a word of warning, but Suimei seemed unconcerned.

"I wonder. I'll let you be the judge of that."

"Ngh—?!"

As Suimei sneered at Eanru, for some reason, Eanru let out a puzzled groan. He staggered, and then shook his head like he was trying to shake something off of it. Hatsumi couldn't tell what had happened. If anything, it looked like he'd been struck with a sudden dizzy spell or case of vertigo. But as she was trying to figure it out, she suddenly realized something.

"A picture of an eye?"

On the ground right next to Suimei, different from the one he used when they had defeated Vuishta, was a simple drawing in the shape of an eye. But looking carefully, there were copies of the same image all over the ground.

"It's a nazar bonjuk, a charm against the evil eye. Since the draconic eye's origin is based on the concept of the evil eye, this will avert it. I'm not just recklessly fighting here, you know?"

"What a surprise. To think that there is a means of defending against it... Could it be that I've come into an unfavorable matchup?"

Despite his words, Eanru was stifling a giddy laugh. Seeing that he was completely joking around, Suimei scowled at him.

"Shut up. It's seriously unfair that I can't properly put up a fight unless I take the time to do something like this."

"Perhaps. But while my foes are rarely able to make up for the difference between us, you were rather quick on the draw with a technique a human should know nothing about."

"A human from this world, you mean."

"Aha, I see! You're a denizen of another world. No wonder the magic you use is different from the magic used here. That must be the reason you're so close with the hero, too."

"It's also why I won't let you take Hatsumi with you."

"In that case, I understand how you feel. But nevertheless, I have a reason to take her with me no matter what." Eanru paused there for a moment and slowly took up his stance again. "I won't ask for forgiveness. I'm well aware that I'll be resented for what I plan to do."

"Whatever. After getting this deep into it, I'm not gonna bitch and moan. That's not gonna stop me from saying whatever the hell else I want, however."

Suimei then boldly stuck out his tongue and wiped the fearful sweat from his brow that refused to stop pouring. Seeing him like that, Eanru smiled.

“That’s good. I’m all too used to hearing fools trying to argue against their inevitable defeat at this point.”

“Sorry, I’m not the type to play the emotional card.”

“No, but you certainly do have a mouth on you.”

“Shut it.”

With that, Suimei snapped his fingers. The sound of bursting air marked the opening to the second act of their increasingly ferocious battle like a violent starter pistol.



After sealing one of Eanru’s moves, as expected, Suimei’s attacks grew more intense than before.

As Suimei had explained, he had now completed his preparations and could finally act as he pleased. He was still racing through the sky while touching down intermittently, but the magic that he was firing off was much stronger, and both his casting speed and frequency had doubled. All of this was about what Eanru had expected, so that wasn’t what had really caught his attention.

As far as he was concerned, Suimei was truly deserving of praise simply for knowing how to fight against a dragonnewt. He even seemed more knowledgeable on the matter than Eanru himself. Whenever Suimei drew close, he would stay just far away enough to keep out of range of Eanru’s fists. It would be nearly impossible to gauge that distance just by eye, but Suimei steered perfectly clear of Eanru’s real threat range.

Normally, when Eanru swung his fist, the wave of wind that followed would be enough to blow away absolutely everything in its path—just like he’d done with those demons. But Suimei was moving around like he’d seen completely through the attack and knew exactly what to do to avoid it.

And then there was matter of the howl wave Eanru had unleashed right as they met. Suimei called it a dragon’s roar, but he seemed to understand its nature and devastating power perfectly. If he were merely a normal human who knew nothing of dragonnewts, he would have been left standing there dumbfounded as he was evaporated. But he’d sensed what Eanru was about to do as he was preparing, and played his defensive hand immediately.

And that wasn’t the only thing he’d seemed to know ahead of time. There was also the dragon’s eye. Knowing that Eanru held the

technique to crush all within his line of sight by just looking at it, Suimei had jumped and flitted about to avoid staying within Eanru's field of vision for any extended period of time. Moreover, he'd secretly been preparing a technique to counter it the whole time.

All of Eanru's powers were deadly. And knowing about them wasn't necessarily enough to do anything about them. They were difficult to grasp in the heat of the moment, and even more difficult to counter. The average person—even knowing what was coming—still would have been laid waste by his power. But not Suimei. He'd gotten through every single one, and was still continuing to put up a fight.

“Heh... heh heh...”

Unconsciously, laughter began to seep from Eanru's lips. Before him was a man who was using magic nonstop. All Suimei had to do was tap the ground, magic circles different from the ones already on the ground would appear behind him. The magic circles that were appearing continuously seemed to be substitutes for chanting. Each circle fired off a spell of its own. The attributes they used varied, and a completely unknown type of attack filled Eanru's field of vision to capacity as it came rushing in at him.

Now, just like when he'd arrived, his expectations were all being betrayed one after the other. Suimei's casting speed and output were good, but Eanru was unable to get his head around how he was doing it so incessantly. Eanru knew that there were ways to improve casting speed, so he wasn't particularly surprised that Suimei could cast spells faster than the average mage. What baffled him was that Suimei didn't even seem to be taking a breath between them as he chanted.

When magic was used consecutively, mana was expelled from the caster's body. Mana being expelled in such a way would also increase body heat. The body naturally confused this with physical exertion, and would leave a caster short of breath. Normally, because of the length of time it took to chant spells, most mages would never find themselves in such a state. But everyone knew that a mage should have to take a breather after casting too many spells consecutively.

But not Suimei. Despite the container of his soul being nothing more than a frail human body, Eanru couldn't even hear the sound of Suimei inhaling and exhaling as he continued to chant. All he

could see once in a while was a pure white vapor made of mana being expelled from his mouth. He was guessing that there was likely some sort of strange organ inside that human body of his responsible for all this.

Suimei's consecutive use of magic was a real threat, but in a sense, his rapid-fire attack was also a form of defense. From the hail of fire, lightning, and light magic he was sending out, it looked like he was on the offensive. But his incessant attacks could also be interpreted as a means of keeping Eanru restrained. That would explain why Suimei hadn't yet fired off any particularly powerful spells in an attempt to deal the final blow.

"If you aren't going to dig in, then I'll be the one to make a move."

With that, Eanru stomped on the ground. It was like an explosion occurred. The surface of the ground split and sent large lumps of earth flying. But that was all a precursor for darting forward. Eanru slipped through Suimei's incoming spells and arrived right in front of him. Eanru could see him gulp as he stood there trembling.

"Damn it, you move too fast!"

Suimei Yakagi let out a shriek of complaint on the spur of the moment. As expected, he was quite flustered. Perhaps due to some bad experience in the past, he was deeply afraid of Eanru—no, of dragons.

However, that was none of Eanru's concern. Aiming for Suimei's lower jaw, he unleashed a kick. To evade the attack coming up from below, Suimei dove to the side. Just as Eanru thought that he'd simply thrown himself to the ground, his powers of flight kicked in. Pulled by an invisible force, his body took an unnatural path through the air, and Eanru chased after him with a backhanded fist.

Suimei had anticipated such a serious blow from the wave of power he felt coming for him, but he couldn't stop it. It struck him in the leg, and when it did, Eanru could hear the unmistakable sound of bones breaking. But the immediate moment after Suimei made an anguished expression, a green circle with letters and numbers inscribed within it took shape around his broken leg. It was recovery magic. Every time he was dealt a serious wound, he'd use it to heal himself.

As such, it was like Suimei and Eanru had come to a stalemate

of sorts. Neither could really get an attack in on the other. As that self-deprecating thought passed through Eanru's head, a fire spell came charging at him.

"Mere desperation!" he scoffed.

"Just take it!" Suimei shouted.

Suimei sounded like he'd meant for this attack to finish Eanru off, but that wasn't quite how it panned out. The large fire spell that came sweeping at Eanru was just a smokescreen. A cover. For just an inch in front of Eanru's head, a tiny magic circle took shape.

"Tch—"

It was too close. The moment Eanru's mind told him that he wouldn't get off lightly if he were hit by that, his body reflexively took evasive action. However, the moment he distanced himself from the first tiny magic circle, another took shape. And just like that, one after one, they chased after him. No matter how fast he moved, how many times he changed directions, whether he took to the skies or not, the tiny magic circles formed a line that chased right after him. Eanru thought they looked like some out of place child's toy as they formed an accordion like shape in the air, but it was then that they finally bared their magical fangs.

"Chain Explosion."

When Suimei uttered the keywords, consecutive explosions erupted. In the blink of an eye, they caught up to Eanru's face.

"Guh—ah!"

Eanru took evasive action, but he was too close to avoid the shockwave. Its power was on the same level as a strike from Jillbert's superhuman strength. He couldn't take it unfazed, and the force of the blow kicked his head back. But Eanru wasn't about to let that stop him. After lightly shaking his head, however, he could see an ultramarine light coming down from the starry night sky.

Did he set this attack up beforehand?

The moment Eanru sensed impending crisis, Suimei began chanting.

"Illustre carmen ad operationem simplicem. Armat ad centum et passive diducit, invocato Augoeides. Strategic Bombing."

[Illustrious spell at simplified operation. Arm from one to a hundred and deploy randomly, invoke Augoeides. Strategic Bombing.]

With that, a hail of light fell from the sky. The magic lights raining down reminded Eanru of the falling stars he'd seen in the Empire, but this wasn't quite the same spell. Having lost his chance

to evade, Eanru overflowed his entire body with mana and took a defensive stance. The spell wouldn't last long, but...

"This isn't the end of it."

With those words, Suimei began preparing his next act. Before Eanru could even notice, Suimei leaped backwards and was already weaving his chant by the time he hit the ground.

"O flammae, legito. Pro venefici doloris clamore. Parito colluctatione et aestuato. Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox."

[Oh flames, assemble. Like the cry of the magician's resentment. Give form to death's agony and burst into flames. Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny.]

Several red magic circles were now forming in the air, and at Suimei Yakagi's feet, a single large magic circle was expanding. It filled with words in the center, and it began revolving in the opposite direction of the secondary circle at its circumference. The ground around it spouted flames that were reflected in Suimei's eyes. That red-hot brilliance held a zealous purpose. And just as Eanru was captivated by it all...

"Itaque concluceto. O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus!"

[So shine. Oh Ashurbanipal's dazzling gem!]

He crushed the gem of light in his right hand. As it shattered to pieces, an inferno burst out of the large magic circle. The leftover fires still burning from before were all consumed by Suimei's superior flame. The very earth boiled and bubbled like molten iron.

Eanru thought it was common sense that dragonnewts were immune to fire, but a bad premonition was crawling up his spine. And rather than common sense—which was often useless on the battlefield—he put his trust in that feeling. Before the boiling earth could reach his feet, before the snakelike flames could wind their way around him, he put all of his strength into his legs and took a great leap back.

He managed to escape the attack, but the sweltering heat spreading in the air scorched his body. The strange pulsing pain he felt on his skin was something he'd never experienced before in his life. As he'd suspected, this was no mere flame. It was likely that rather than just a burst of fire, there was a curse applied to it. Just as Eanru judged that it would be bad to take such fire head on, alarm bells began ringing in the depths of his mind.

Piercing through the flames right in front of him... was Suimei. Just as Eanru was caught up in bewilderment at the sight of a mage

closing in on him single-handedly, the mage in front of him turned into smoke and disappeared.

Seeing that, Eanru once more let out a smile. Before he could ascertain where the dispersed smoke had gone, he could feel a presence behind him. As he hastily turned around, Suimei was standing right in front of him with a small magic circle in the palm of his hand.

“OOOOOOOOH!”

“HAAAAAAAAAA!”

Both men unleashed their fighting spirits at the same time. A crash of howls. In answer to Suimei thrusting out his magically inscribed palm, Eanru threw his fist. Immediately following the collision of power, an explosive shockwave was released that sent Eanru flying. As he corrected his posture and looked up, he saw that Suimei has also been sent flying—very likely by the same shockwave.

Just how much would this fight make his heart dance? Eanru hadn’t had such an engaging fight since the day he was born. To think that he would be blessed right now with the magnificent, unending fight that he’d been seeking all this time...

“What’s so funny?”

“Hmm? Was I laughing? Aah, no, it’s just a battle like this... Doesn’t it make you happy?”

“Yeah, okay... You’re *that* kinda guy, huh?”

Suimei Yakagi quietly muttered something about “battle maniacs” in annoyance. It was a fair way to describe Eanru, and though Suimei spat such words loathsomely, it was unmistakable praise to Eanru’s ears. Being considered a formidable enemy by a strong opponent gave meaning to the way he’d lived his life up until now. It was validating.

Therefore, this battle had significance. This was Eanru’s very *raison d’être*. His only regret was that it was happening now. It was pure serendipity that he’d gotten embroiled in such a fight in such an unexpected place. However, because he was in the middle of a mission, he didn’t have the leisure to fight to his heart’s content. That saddened him.

“Aah, it’s beyond my control...”

It seemed that his quiet lamenting sigh reached Suimei’s ears. Suimei furrowed his brow, perhaps puzzled by the complete change of tone that had come over the previously excited dragonnewt.

However, for some reason, he wasn't shooting out any magic. Despite the fact that he had been firing ceaselessly until now and showed no signs of being short of breath, he was apparently taking a short break.

It was possible that he was simply preparing another trick, but concluding he would deal with whatever it may be, Eanru stepped forward. He unleashed a flurry of consecutive strikes, but the mage before him seemed accustomed to close range combat. He skillfully ward off Eanru's blows. For a mage, engaging at a distance like this was fatal. But not for Suimei. He didn't even bat an eye, leaving Eanru once again astonished.

But even if he was competently dealing with the situation, he was a poor match for Eanru who specialized in such close quarters combat. Naturally, a human could never compete with the physical strength of a dragonnewt. The arms he was using to ward off Eanru's strikes were becoming red and bruised in the blink of an eye.

"Urgh..."

While letting out a groan, Suimei put some distance between them. When Eanru refrained from chasing after him, Suimei looked back with a puzzled glance.

"It's such an exquisite feeling to be engaged in a difficult battle."

"Huh?"

"Isn't it? If your opponent is tough to deal with, it makes the fight last that much longer. And then, it's possible to test out all the techniques you've been fostering."

"...Bewitching others with techniques and having that reciprocated is certainly enjoyable. Just not in situations like this."

"Agreed. My, aren't we birds of a feather?"

"No, my grievances are different from yours. That much is obvious."

"That kind of thing is trivial."

"...That's your deal, isn't it? You're one of those people who gets everything you're not interested in over with quickly, aren't you? You're really something, seriously."

"Hmph."

While amusing himself with their conversation, even now, cold sweat was pouring down Suimei's forehead. But it had to be said that it was perhaps less than before. It was likely that he too had

become stronger for the sake of accomplishing his goals in the fight at hand. Even though Suimei spoke to the contrary, their conversations up until this point were on the same wavelength, so it seemed he'd gotten into his element somewhat.

Even if they were trying to get there for different reasons, their goals were the same. That elevated peak that nobody could reach, and a dream stimulated that desire... They were both staring down the same thing—their dreams.

"It's hard to get, huh? Really. You have a different kind of radiance from that man."

"...?"

Just like a light within the darkness was more dazzling than anything else, Suimei was brilliant. Jillbert had certainly been right on that point.

"At any rate, you sure talk a lot."

"Honestly, I surprise even myself. Even though talking in the middle of a battle is the height of folly— Aah, that's it, isn't it? That's what this is. That thing where you become overexcited and start talking as you get worn out, right?"

Such idle conversation in the heat of battle was something Eanru had never engaged in before. However, the reason he was unable to stop in spite of himself was because it was difficult for him to understand. That made it important. And if he was exposed to it too much, he would no longer want to destroy it. Unconsciously, he may have been taking that into consideration. But because he fought for the sake of destruction, this was a tremendous contradiction for him.

Then, it seemed that Suimei was finished with his break. Eanru watched as the fallen trees were swept up and hurled into the air with a roar. The trunks of the darkwood trees were thick and sturdy. If a human was struck by one, it would be gruesome. Good thing Eanru wasn't human.

"Such play won't even serve as a distraction to me."

Just as he implied, he could see Suimei's shadow darting between the gargantuan trees. Eanru smashed through one with his fist to come after him, but Suimei used that opening to attack. Wielding a silver sword, he came in with a thrust, but...

"That will never work."

The point of his blade reached Eanru's chest, but could only pierce his clothing. There was no way a mere blade made by a

human could pierce a dragonnewt's skin. So just who had the upper hand here?

"I'll be taking that arm."

Using his hand like a blade, Eanru severed Suimei Yakagi's right arm. Losing his dominant arm was the price he paid for daring to come into close combat with a dragonnewt unprepared. His right arm flew off, and blood started gushing out of the stump left behind.

From a distance, Eanru could hear the hero screaming. And before him, he could see Suimei's face twist in anguish. Nevertheless, he didn't falter or fall back. Quite the opposite. He stepped forward like he had an opening to attack.

But even this was within the realm of Eanru's expectations. Striking first and sacrificing a piece of oneself to gain an opening was a common enough tactic. However, what Suimei did next baffled him. He was moving the stump of a right arm he had left.

That would never even reach him to hit him. It wasn't long enough. Had he misread the distance? No, it had to be an act of sheer desperation. That was a human flaw. Instead of thinking things through properly, they prioritized attacking. But in that moment, Suimei calmly opened his mouth.

"Here you go."

The severed right arm that was tumbling through the air suddenly changed trajectory and jumped towards Eanru. Seeing that, he couldn't help smiling.

"Haha! So it's come to this?"

There was the thrill of joy in his words. This was the first time in a long time that a technique had completely and utterly surprised him. But the surprises wouldn't stop there. The arm flew right back over to Suimei and connected where it had been severed.

"HYAAAAAH!"

Immediately following that, a magic circle formed between the arm and the stump, and rotated with a green brilliance. He then stomped his foot, planting it firmly in the ground. The earth shattered below and there was a shockwave of wind and mana. From there, Suimei unleashed a strike.

"U-Urgh!"

His fist caught Eanru right in the face. He never once thought that a human would hold such destructive force in their fists. The earth beneath his feet was unable to withstand the force from the

blow, and it nearly collapsed beneath him as he was pushed back.

Remaining upright, Eanru put a hand to his jaw when he finally came to a stop. As if to investigate the damage done, he craned and cracked his neck. Then, without wasting another moment, Eanru leaped forward and approached Suimei swiftly.

“Seriously? That barely did anything...”

“Unfortunately, I’m quite a resilient being.”

“Even though you have a humanoid form, there wasn’t any damage to the brain? This is a damn scam. A rip-off.”

Both that complaint and the pain he received felt good to Eanru. He pushed on his neck with his hand and cranked it around as he continued to inspect it. The man who had dealt him such an unexpected blow was already making his next move, but Eanru couldn’t help yielding to the pleasant sensation welling up in him that he hadn’t felt for so long. As Suimei fired a spell, Eanru kicked the ground, creating a grand cloud of dust.

“You punk! Copying a human now?!”

“Not at all. Smokescreens are a valuable technique.”

The cloud of dust completely concealed Eanru. He couldn’t see, but with this he also couldn’t be seen. Abandoning all unnecessary thoughts, he devoted his senses completely to reading presences around him. His opponent was a mage who held a vast amount of power. If he followed the mana, he could accurately locate Suimei even without his eyes.

Or, he would have been able to if he hadn’t suddenly multiplied.

“He split? No, multiplied?”

“It’s called Fast Replication.”

It wasn’t just his mana presence that had multiplied. Eanru could start to see multiple figures through the dust. It was as if several Suimeis had suddenly appeared. And mere moments after Eanru heard him talk, the ground suddenly shifted and split.

“What—”

Eanru stumbled. He couldn’t tell what happened. Even as he replayed the situation in his mind, he couldn’t tell where the spell had come from. The ground that had been boiled by Suimei’s fire magic wasn’t so brittle and fragile that it would just crumble like that.

As he promptly focused his gaze right below his feet, he could see the light of mana. Just when had that circle been put in place?

When he looked up, he could see Suimei smiling.

I see, that light spell from before...

It must have been an effect of that rain of light. Suimei wasn't just attacking with it. He was sowing magic circles in the earth.

Before the fight began, Suimei had plainly told Eanru that it was a magician's style to catch an opponent off guard. Certainly, this chain of unexpected attacks was a splendid tactic. Eanru wasn't at all wounded by the ground shifting beneath him, but he was now forced to brace himself and robbed of his mobility. And like that, he was a sitting duck for Suimei's next attack.

The earth began to rise up around him. Coiling like a vortex, it stretched up to the sky and then came crashing down on him. He thought surely Suimei would know better than to think an attack like this would work on him, but Eanru would yet again be surprised. It wasn't exactly an attack.

"Ground Seal."

All Eanru could see was an incessant avalanche of dirt. And before long, it completely covered him up.



As the rising cloud of dust settled down, the ground fell smoothly into a shape like a whirlpool. Seeing Eanru sink under the Ground Seal spell, Suimei could hear Hatsumi shout out in exaltation at their apparent victory.

"You did it!"

"Nope."

It was too soon to declare this a win. Hatsumi, however, was rather baffled at the disparity between what she was seeing and Suimei was saying. Suimei held up his hand and urged her to step back, and just as he did, the whirlpool of earth burst open with a thunderous roar. What soared into the sky from below was none other than Eanru.

"When I heard you say that you fancied attacking people when their guard was down, I thought you meant surprise attacks. But now I see this is what you meant, isn't it?"

Praising Suimei, Eanru spoke in a refreshing tone like he hadn't been wounded at all. Secretly grinding his teeth to see his opponent like that, Suimei replied frivolously.

"It's just the difference between cowardice and elegance."

“My goodness, I’ve learned a lot from you. Since it’s standard for mages to chant and fire, my actions have unexpectedly become quite monotonous and dull, it seems. But... it’s also refreshing to be surprised once in a while, you know.”

“Well, you’re welcome.”

Suimei’s tone of voice made it clear what he was really saying was “shut up.” Eanru looked at him questioningly, a dangerous glint in his topaz eyes.

“You realized I wasn’t defeated from that just now, right? Why didn’t you prepare anything else to follow up?”

“Who knows?”

“I didn’t think you were the type to overlook such an opportunity. It was the same when your magic unnaturally paused earlier. In that case... there must be a reason you couldn’t fire.”

“...”

“From the looks of it, it seems I hit the mark.”

Seeing Eanru’s increasingly confident expression, Suimei once more ground his teeth. Eanru’s guess was indeed a bullseye. Just as he said, the reason Suimei had stopped firing magicka was because he couldn’t. Due to his repeated use magicka, entropy in the area was nearing its limit.

As such, he was unable to deal a decisive blow. Just using some half-assed magicka that wouldn’t trigger the magicka melt phenomenon would be completely futile. That’s why he’d chosen a spell that would at least buy him some time.

Magicka woven together using modern magicka theory could be cast quickly. However, it also increased entropy greatly, creating a bottleneck of sorts. There *needed* to be an interval between spells, and when there wasn’t, a magician could end up a single step away from disaster like Suimei was now. He knew the risks of what he was doing, but nevertheless, falling into this kind of situation was vexing all the same.

After wiping off the dirt and sand on his clothes, Eanru once more took a combat stance. He—unlike Suimei who had been hamstringing himself all this time—was composed and didn’t have a single wound to show for their entire fight. He looked truly unstoppable.

Based on appearance, he reminded Suimei more of an Eastern dragon, but his fighting style was just like that of the Western version. The distinction was also a bit hazy, especially concerning

the origin of the evil eye that became the draconic eye. Since the eight great dragon kings from the Lotus Sutra also had poisonous eyes, Suimei had assumed that this was somehow related. But because his ground sealing spell didn't work on Eanru, it was difficult to imagine he came from those water gods. The power to suck up and scatter the earth was distinctly a Western dragon's. There was no mistaking that.

Just the fact that Eanru resembled a dragon at all terrified Suimei, but what was truly dreadful were his attacks and the weight behind them. For a while now, Suimei had been carefully observing his strikes and shockwaves. Such power should be impossible with Eanru's slender body, but if his weight wasn't properly reflected by his appearance—which was relatively common in inhuman creatures—it might be a different story. It was a power different from magicka, born purely from brute strength, it worked similarly to the Long Sword of the Absolute Edge that Hatsumi used. Their attacks were simply that powerful.

This man was a master in close-range combat. But it was also a poor move to stay too far away from him. Looking at it from a scientific angle, he had something like a high-output microwave shockwave combined with a noise weapon like a plasma emission device. From a magicka angle, it could be described as exponentially increasing the heat in the area and causing forced combustion. That was how he'd leveled their surroundings before the fight. And just like his breath, he could control its directionality.

“Though lightning breath is way scarier...”

Suimei was reminded of a similar attack he had seen before. It was different from a dragon's roar, but it had come from a creature that took the shape of a human and let out an attack that annihilated all living things—all from its mouth. Of the destructive organic attacks that creatures above ground could use, breath attacks were considered one of the most atrocious. Because they were so unique in nature, they were nearly impossible to properly defend against.

And the monsters that could use them stood at the top of the pyramid in terms of power, even in the modern world. Their prowess boggled the mind. It was mythical—like it came straight out of legend. It was like such power came from a completely different time and era. A completely different dimension.

And these monsters could take humanoid forms. Perhaps that

was true in this world as well, and the dragonnewt was one such example.

As if to confirm this, Eanru began moving in a way that could not merely be described as “superhuman.” He leaped about like he was toying with Suimei who, even with the eyes of a magician, was unable to keep up with him. Rather than just being fast, Eanru was moving in ways that were impossible for a human to conceive.

As the green bolt of lightning struck the ground and leaped to a new location, Suimei would try and follow the trajectory with his eyes. But before he knew it, he’d looked too far the wrong way and lost sight of him. When he realized and looked back, the only thing he could catch a glimpse of was the trail of light Eanru left in his wake. Looking this way and then that, Suimei’s eyes darted around fruitlessly. He just couldn’t keep track of him.

Before such otherworldly power, Suimei had no card to play. And so he decided to increase the output of his mana furnace. With that single thought, the reactor core within his body was released, and with that figurative kindling thrown into the furnace, his heart rate skyrocketed. The pounding in his chest was louder than anything else he could hear. Surpassing his own limits, he pushed his body on as far as it could go.

“Just how much mana...”

Eanru was still untraceable, but he let out a few words of admiration.

The mana furnace was a sort of organ that generated mana commensurate to a magician’s mana consumption and helped support them. For a normal magician, there was a limit to the mana they could use stably without triggering an overflow, called “regular mana.”

The mana furnace would generate mana alongside that to manifest the mysteries. And after a magician’s regular mana was exhausted, the mana from the furnace would overtake it and essentially shut down the magician. Releasing the reactor core was a way to prevent that by releasing the limiters on regular mana to match the output of the furnace.

When that happened, up to what the magician’s body could withstand, it was possible to continuously build up more mana. And the more mana a magician had, the bigger and more powerful spells they could use. It would push their bodies to higher-order existences, and increase the mysteries that they could manifest.

Suimei still couldn't see Eanru. This would be fatal if he couldn't track him down, and he could only think of one way to accomplish that. The moment Eanru went on the offensive was the first time Suimei was able to identify his location.

Suimei activated spells to reinforce and strengthen his body. After he finished casting them, his back was struck as if assaulted by lightning. The strike could have been fatal in and of itself, but Suimei was able to hold his ground with his heightened body. And that presented him with an opportunity.

Eanru still had his fist planted in Suimei's back. Before he could break away, the space in their surroundings was twisted by magicka. Reality appeared as though it twisted like the inside of a marble, and Eanru's center of gravity was altered. His movements dulled. From there, Suimei went on to amplify gravity itself.

"Gravitatem, duplex coniunctum!"

[Gravity, twofold concatenation!]

That wasn't enough. Without dwelling on the spell, Suimei moved right into the next and added on to it, completely negating any lag.

"Gravitatem, terci contextit!"

[Gravity, unite threefold!]

If Eanru had even a single free moment, he would be able to escape from the gravity cage. Suimei knew he couldn't stop his hands, mouth, or magicka.

Suimei caught a glimpse of Eanru's bitter yet delighted face. "Enchant me more. Make me grind my teeth harder." Suimei could understand what he was thinking just from his expression. And that didn't waver at all even inside the gravity cage. In a way, it was terrifying.

Suimei fired magicka from the five elements. Using the teachings of the five practices of the Bodhisattvas that mutually helped each other and organized the world, he instead manifested the elements that antagonized each other and gave birth to destruction. After creating a defensive circle below Hatsumi, the raging five elements gradually reacted with each other and caused an annihilation effect that blew everything away.

The scale of the blast surpassed that of Eanru's roar. This time, the entire darkwood forest was wiped off of the map without a trace. But lo and behold, the dragonnewt was still there. Apparently resistant to attacks that were pure force and power, Eanru was

standing just outside Suimei's range while laughing delightedly.

The effect of the five elements was too weak. An attack based on a higher-order concept wasn't enough to strike down the dragonnewt. When Suimei came to this conclusion, he let out a deliberately loud, belated scream from the pain that assaulted his back. Unexpectedly, his feet stumbled. His cold sweat turned to ice as it dripped off his back. And right before him was now that green bolt of lightning that would never miss an opportunity like this.

"I've got you, Suimei Yakagi."

Suimei immediately moved to protect his head with his arm, and a fist came flying right at it. The left arm he'd held up to protect himself was bent backward. And as if that wasn't enough, each of his legs took a strike. Finally, an extraordinary kick was driven into his torso.

"G-Guuuah..."

Sent flying by the kick, Suimei's body rolled across the ground. While conscious that he was rolling as his head was whipped around and jolted into a haze, he immediately started to apply healing magic to his broken limbs. Even though he was immediately making a recovery, Eanru's shadow lurked right over him. He was open once again, and Eanru would attack without fail.

"Ugh, rrgh, gaah...."

For every strike he received, Suimei applied healing magicka to his body. But his magicka couldn't keep up now. Taking blow after blow like he was being hit with a giant iron wrecking ball, Suimei was receiving an unprecedented beating.

I'm... going to lose here? Me?

Rolling across yet again, Suimei came to a stop lying face down. He could taste blood and dirt in his mouth. His body was screaming. But even so, he tried to stand. He clawed at the ground and grasped lumps of earth.

"Is this the end?" Eanru asked, unfeeling.

"Shut up..."

"But you can't stand, can you?"

"Shut up."

"If you can't come after me, then I'll take that woman with me, you know?"

"SHUT UP!"

"That's it! Scream! If you can never hand her over, then scream out your feelings! Howl! Lay everything bare! There should be more

to your power than this! You can't hold back this late in the game!"

He didn't need to be told that. Just as a swordsman accepted that they might be inviting death when they drew their sword, a magician also put their life on the line the moment they decided to take action. They would burn both their souls and their mana to exhaustion.

And so Suimei got back up. And he would again and again until his body would be rendered completely immobile. Until his heart twisted and broke. Until the day that he lost sight of the dream he'd been chasing.

"O flammae, legito! Pro venefici doloris clamore! Parito colluctatione et aestuato! Deferto impedimentum fatum atrox!"

[Oh flames, assemble! Like the cry of the magician's resentment! Give form to death's agony and burst into flames! Bestow the one who obstructs me with a dreadful destiny!]

"You've already shown me that spell!"

He was right. Suimei had used this one before, but it was just an opener now. As if replying to his deep desires, the magicka took on a different shape. Fire shot out behind Suimei like a jet engine, and as he grasped Ashurbanipal's gem within his right hand, a dazzling conflagration wrapped around his arm.

Pouncing at this opening, Eanru leaped in from the front. Showing contempt for that lapse in judgment, Suimei slipped into the chest of the leaping dragonnewt. As Eanru opened his eyes wide in surprise, Suimei put all his might into his magicka.

"Itaque conluceto! Atque deicito! O Ashurbanipalis fulgidus lapillus!"

[So shine! And shoot through! Oh Ashurbanipal's dazzling gem!]

His right hand that grasped the gem became a fist, the flames bursting towards the back became a mechanism to aid in acceleration, and that fist buried itself in Eanru's solar plexus. Eanru was unable to escape it in any way, and was sent flying backward. And before he could regain his posture, Ashurbanipal's flames rushed in after him. From within those flames, Suimei could hear Eanru's howl.

"NOT YEEEEEEEEET!"

He let out a loud roar that threatened to pierce Suimei's eardrums and blow away the flames around him. Even after taking a hit of brilliant radiance from a gem that could bestow death on all living things, the dragonnewt's knee did not hit the ground. As

such, it was inevitable he would retaliate and they would clash again. Without basking in the glory of his magicka, Suimei prepared his last hand as he steeled himself for the close-range battle that was once more about to begin.

Immediately, a light made of mana formed around his right hand shaped like a blade. It sparkled like the light of dawn, and using that, he quietly drew out letters and symbols that would give birth to magicka.

A magicka circle instantly sprung forth at his feet. As he continued his actions, magicka circles began to take shape outside the circumference of the first. As he wove his magicka, terrible memories surged through him. Despite having power, his heart was weak. That's why on that fateful day at that fateful hour on that fateful battlefield, the unthinkable had happened.

It was there that he'd lost something important. All because when he stood before an excessively powerful existence, he was unable to move. His defenses were late. And to protect him, his father took a dragon's roar that was meant for Suimei.

It was on that day that he'd inherited his father's wish. In his place, Suimei would do what he hadn't been able to. He would save that woman. He swore he would. On that day, the weak, young Yakagi Suimei had died alongside his father. And now...

"I'll never let anything like that happen again..."

What he wove as he muttered like he was expelling all the air from his lungs was a chant. A true chant.

"The Progenitor emerges from the sky at dawn, and accomplishes the wishes of all heaven and earth. To release the Apostle from his mission, and to release the Apostle from his own hands, the Progenitor descended before the Apostle."

As the chant was exposed, the world began to shake. Quietly, steadily, and eventually violently, and as if no one would be allowed to stand. Having finally shaken off the flames, Eanru held his breath at the stark change in his surroundings. At this distance, even if he ran right away, he would be unable to do anything about the magicka before it was complete.

"And thus the Apostle fell to the ground. Because his wings of light were plucked. And thus the Apostle fell into hell. Because his body deemed it acceptable to be a nest of malice. And so he fell. And the Progenitor passed Judgment, and drove the Apostle away. And so I pray. Just as the Progenitor demonstrated. Yes, to manifest

that infinite light with no end just as he did.”

And just as Eanru got into range...

“Everything becomes unknown and is—!”

The last word he needed to pronounce was on the tip of his tongue. All he needed to do was grasp that infinite light in his hand. But it was still too strong. It was too soon.

“U-Ugh, shit... DELIVEEEEEEEEEERED!”

No matter how strong the will of a magician, an incomplete chant would mean a failed spell. The aftermath of that torrent of power he was unable to control wrapped around the two colliding men and caught them.

As the blinding light died down, a cold night air blew through the battlefield. All that was there was the scorched earth and the carbonized wreckage of trees that piled up as charcoal on the ground. Looking up from where he’d been blown back to, Eanru spoke doubtfully.

“... What did you do? The air has reverted to how it was a little before?”

“The aftermath stagnated time, it seems. It’s something like space rewinding. It’s probably an effect of the outbreak of low-speed light. Because it broke out, time is flowing to match it, or something... Well, that kind of thing doesn’t matter...”

From the heat filling his inner organs and the red-hot feeling assaulting his throat, Suimei let out a bloody cough. His internal organs had suffered from his stunt just now.

But even so, the single strike that he staked everything on had failed. What had happened here was a far cry from how he’d intended this to go down. Because he hadn’t been able to get to the last word in the spell at the right time, it ended in failure. No, it was because he was still insufficient to use such magicka.

Due to the rebound caused by magicka failure, also known as turning, Suimei slowly fell to his knees. He’d staked everything on this bet, and was left completely wiped out. A strong numbness assaulted his body. He would be unable to move for a while.

“...”

It was a fatal mistake in a battle, but his opponent wasn’t moving either. No, he couldn’t move. It was likely that Eanru was also wounded. He had completely taken the surprise attack from Ashurbanipal’s flame, and the torrent from the infinite light without end. Even though it hadn’t fully manifested, it still had an effect on

him.

While Suimei remained immobile, a shadow suddenly appeared before his eyes. As he raised his eyes, he could see a girl in a uniform drawing her sword from its sheathe.

“Hatsumi... I told you... to step back...”

“You can’t move, right? It’s time for me to step forward.”

“If you were watching just now, you should know that you don’t stand a chance.”

“Ugh, I know that *without* you saying it. But I can still buy you some time until you can move again... And besides, both of you are wounded now, right?”

“Heh, certainly so.”

Eanru smiled as he slowly stood. With Hatsumi stepping forward, this could be a once in a lifetime chance, but even so, Eanru was being finicky about putting his burned clothing and battered body in order. Meanwhile, Hatsumi took a stance and aimed the tip of her blade at Eanru’s eyes. However, her hand gripping the hilt of that sword was sweating coldly and slightly trembling.

“Are we doing this?” she asked.

“No, I’m done. I’ll have you allow me to leave here,” Eanru replied, shaking his head.

“Huh?”

“What?”

Hearing Eanru’s unexpected words, Hatsumi and Suimei both raised their doubts.

“What, is that strange?”

“Well, that’s...”

“Since the fight has been interrupted, I’ll leave it at that. The chance to retreat has just come around, is all.”

They couldn’t tell if that was his real intention. Hearing his casual way of talking about it, however, Suimei questioned him in a dubious tone.

“Yeah? Weren’t you gonna take Hatsumi with you?”

“Indeed, but she’s something I was to acquire after being victorious over you. Besides, I don’t want to leave you with a grudge.”

“A grudge?”

“That’s right. If I took the hero with me, you would hold it against me. The fight between us would become a fight riddled with

a surplus of hatred. That is not what I wish for. An enjoyable fight, even if it's unfair, is something that must be done in earnest."

"That's why, since there was an excess of it this time, you didn't fight with me to the end?"

"That's right."

Eanru closed his eyes as he quietly nodded. It was an absurd reason, but it didn't seem like a lie coming from this strange man. Suimei was still suspicious, but Eanru made to withdraw. It seemed he really did have no more intention of fighting. Dispersing his overflowing fighting spirit, the hot atmosphere around him returned to a cool breeze. Seeing that figure just before his eyes, Suimei sat cross-legged where he was, and let out a somewhat astonished laugh.

"You're really something, you know that. I've never met a guy like you up until now who so genuinely liked fighting."

"I can think of no more flattering praise. It makes all the time I spent polishing my skills worthwhile."

Eanru humbly smiled and turned around, then turned to leave. And as if leaving behind words for a fellow comrade in arms...

"Now then, Suimei Yakagi, I shall see you again."

"Yeah."

It was a promise for a rematch. Even though Suimei didn't want to ever fight someone like that again, even though he was completely reluctant, he couldn't help but acknowledge Eanru's implicit request. His heart may have simply been replying to his opponent's sincerity.

After Eanru left, the quiet of the forest eventually returned. There was still the sound of crackling embers, but even so, it felt silent because what had been making a racket in his heart had finally vanished. The tension that had been mounting in Hatsumi's body seemed to have dispersed, and she sat down right where she was with a thud.

"He's gone..."

"Yup."

"Just what was he?"

"Who knows? All I can say for now is that he's a strange enemy. And a battle maniac."

After giving his brief personal opinion on Eanru, Suimei let out all the breath in his lungs.

"Shit. Next time, I won't lose..."

After spitting out all the unpleasant air in his lungs, he leaked out a vexed vow to overcome a future obstacle. He wasn't defeated. To the contrary, he accomplished his goal this time around, so if he was pushed to say it, this was a victory. However, the battle ended with Suimei at a disadvantage. It didn't make him feel like he'd won. So conversely, he really felt like he was defeated.

"Are you alright?"

"Well, as long as I'm alive, I'll manage somehow or other."

"I see."

After answering Hatsumi and hearing her brief reply, she suddenly seemed to remember something and once more began speaking.

"Now that I think of it, you seemed to be listening to what he said pretty carefully."

"Hmm?"

"You talked, right? With that guy."

"Now that you mention it, you're right."

"Why? There's no need to listen to what the enemy has to say, right? You also talked to him pointlessly in the middle of the fight."

"Well, that kind of thing happens. The subtleties behind that kinda fight to the death turning into something else gets all jumbled up. There's a tacit understanding."

"It would've been fine to trap him while he was talking."

"I agree completely. But with that kinda opponent, I just can't help but feel it's too boorish. You know? An enemy you have to defeat head on... Anyone out there has one or two of those no matter what. That's why I don't want to lie to myself. Of course, I was thinking of ways of letting only you get away you know?"

Honestly speaking, that was Suimei's true desire. If Eanru's objective was Hatsumi, in the worst scenario, he could just get her somewhere that Eanru couldn't get to her. However, Hatsumi frowned as though she heavily disapproved of this.

"And... you don't look happy about that."

"Of course not."

"Hey, you saw my power, right?"

After Hatsumi nodded once, Suimei continued.

"I'm still midway on my path, but I'm well aware that the power I hold is great. In short, I'm something like an autonomous powder keg. If a guy like that did as he pleased, and flung around his power without knowing anything, you can tell what will

happen, right?”

“That’s...”

“I’m a magician. Not just monsters, I’ve also beaten several people to death with magicka. But they all attacked me. I didn’t have a choice. But what if that wasn’t the case? If I swung around my power without properly understanding the circumstances of those around me, and if that turned into something that couldn’t be undone—”

A heavy silence filled the air. Hatsumi could say nothing back to him. It was obvious. This was something that Hatsumi, who had no memories yet possessed power, had to be acutely aware of regarding herself as well.

“I don’t want to regret anything after I’ve done it. That’s why I’ll have things I want to know, and things I’ll doubt partway through. The opponent’s personal circumstances are occasionally something that can’t be immediately intuited. Just because they’re hostile, it’s far too hasty to decide that they have to be defeated no matter what. Well, if you’re too cautious, it’s also possible to lose an opportunity, so I can’t really say which way is better. It’s all a load of trouble, huh? All of it...”

As he let out a self-deprecating laugh and looked down at himself, Hatsumi still had nothing to say back to him. While she made a face like she was carefully scrutinizing something, Suimei gave her his real impression of Eanru.

“Well, even so, it didn’t seem like he was in the right to me.”

“The moment he said he said he’d use me, there was no more room for negotiation.”

Hearing Hatsumi’s gloomy declaration, Suimei let out a dark sigh and nodded. And then, he suddenly fell to the ground with his arms and legs splayed out.

“Yakagi?”

“I’m so tired I could just die. I really, really want a futon right now.”

At his idiotic declaration, Hatsumi drooped her shoulders in a crestfallen manner. It didn’t seem she would be able to pull him up anytime soon.



The battle that was taking place on the plains between the

Alliance army and the demon army had already come to a close. It had concluded in a draw due to sustained casualties on both sides, but the Alliance army—who had underestimated the strength of their enemy—had suffered significantly greater losses than the demon army.

Currently, outside the fortress that served as the main stronghold in the area, the Alliance army was collecting itself. The surviving generals, Hatsumi's companions, Rumeya, Lefille, and the others were all inside the main tent, and the atmosphere there was absolutely stifling. The war council meeting about how to proceed was heated, to say the least. Weitzer, whose position demanded he consider all available options, was listening to each and every proposal from the generals and staff officers.

"Your Highness, how about we pull the army back for a short while? If we retreat into an area with a ravine, it would put us in an advantageous..." one officer suggested.

"No, a ravine is just as likely to be a disadvantage. Plenty of the demons possess the ability to fly. It would be better to resolutely pull back the entire line at once and rally the army..." suggested another.

"Both are out of the question. Until the hero has returned, we will not pull back," declared Weitzer.

All sorts of ideas were being thrown around, but Weitzer put his foot down on that matter. Despite his firm stance, however, most of the staff officers and generals were scarcely able to keep their opinions to themselves. One even tenaciously clung to the conversation.

"But Your Highness, if we remain like this too long, we will be unable to break the deadlock. If it comes to a fight on the open plains once more, we will take catastrophic casualties."

"That is exactly why we have requested reinforcements from every vassal state. We will wait until the soldiers and supplies arrive."

"But while we wait, the soldiers only grow more and more anxious! It's now that we need to present to them a firm plan! If we don't, they will believe all is lost and morale will plummet!"

At that, Weitzer seemed to reach the limits of his princely patience before his men who wouldn't listen to him. Slamming both hands on the desk in front of him, he kicked back his chair and stood up abruptly.

"If we do not put ourselves in order, the soldiers will certainly lose hope! But without the hero, there will be no hope for the army! Moreover, if we abandon the hero and run away after she saved us, can we even call ourselves soldiers?"

"Hrk!"

"You hear me?! The hero saved us, and we will do the same for the hero! Those who would dare abandon her have no right to rely on her! Heed my words and engrave them into your hearts!"

Weitzer's booming shout thundered through the tent with enough force to silence all present. It was like time stood still for a moment. Meanwhile, Rumeya, who was sitting at the end of the table at the war council, began speaking to Lefille, who was sitting beside her.

"My goodness. Seems to be quite the sticky situation for them, eh?"

"Please don't talk like it's none of your business, Rumeya-dono. Shouldn't you also have a say in this matter? As the head of a guild branch, please offer your words of support."

Hearing Lefille's somewhat exasperated opinion, Rumeya shrugged her shoulders.

"I've got no sense for the delicacies of tactics. That being said, no matter how this goes, I'll at least listen."

"Is that really alright...?"

"It's fine, it's fine!"

Rumeya puffed away at her pipe as she completely, irresponsibly wrote off the matter. Both Felmenia and Liliana, who were also sitting next to them, looked like they were troubled by her indifferent attitude. Not minding them, Rumeya called out to one of the nearby soldiers.

"Hey, hey... You over there. What's the word from the scouts?"

"Ma'am! The demon army has already retreated. The latest from each of the other fortresses report the same. Regarding the possibility of an advance, however, they are still unable to come to a conclusion."

"But the demons are retreating, huh? It's weird, innit? Even if we rallied at the end there, if I had to say, they still held the advantage. Lefi, what do you think?"

"There are two reasons for them to retreat. Either they fulfilled their goal, or they took unsustainable losses. They had serious casualties, certainly, but I don't think it was enough to cause the

whole army to retreat.”

“In other words... the demons accomplished their goal. That’s what... we’re left to assume.”

“It’s just as Lily says. And in that case, the problem is...”

“What exactly was their goal? Well, Lefi, what have you come up with for us on that front?”

“The Alliance army suffered great casualties and is at a disadvantage, while their hero, Hatsumi-dono, is currently missing. The damage done to the army was serious, certainly, but the odds are much higher that their goal was the hero.”

Lefille’s answer was undeniable, and Felmenia showed a somewhat perturbed expression upon hearing it.

“S-So... Suimei-dono failed? Is that what you mean?”

To Felmenia, who had complete and absolute faith in Suimei, the idea that he’d failed to rescue Hatsumi was unthinkable. However, Lefille shook her head.

“No, that’s not necessarily the case. The demons’ plan was largely to separate Hatsumi-dono from the army. And in that respect, you could say that they accomplished what they wanted to. They may have begun pulling back as soon as they heard that happened. And besides, we haven’t heard any declarations from them that the hero was defeated. There’s a good probability that she’s still alive.”

“I see...”

If the hero had been defeated, the demons wouldn’t hesitate to raise her head to the sky with a great roar of celebration. There could perhaps be nothing more damning to the Alliance army’s morale. If that happened, despite whatever losses they’d taken, they’d press on in attacking. The path to victory from there would be a short one.

“That’s assuming that the demons have that level of craftiness and intelligence, though.”

“Those things are cunning. They take advantage of weaknesses immediately. That’s why they targeted Hatsumi-dono specifically.”

That, essentially, was the conclusion to Lefille’s explanation—and her answer to Rumea’s original question.

“The Alliance army will likely be licking their wounds here for a while. If they make the poor decision to pull back their army for fear of greater casualties, the demons will take that opportunity to pounce, which will only further deteriorate morale. In the worst

case, the retreating demon army might just turn around.”

“So that’s what you want me to tell them?”

Rumeya was pointing over to Weitzer and the army representative, and Lefille nodded. Rumeya glanced over Weitzer, and then back at Lefille again. The other side of the tent was still as tense as could be. Rather than cooling down, it seemed things had only gotten more heated. The staff officers were still unable to let go of the idea of a retreat, and even Gaius and Selphy—who had been quiet up to this point—had joined the serious discussion.

“Aww, no way, no way, no waaaaay! Instead of jumping into that hot mess, I’d rather just go cut into the demon forces... Hey, I said that on impulse, but should we just go do it? We can head right out. Wouldn’t that be best?”

Rumeya’s tails were shifting around restlessly as she gave the group a wink. Seeing this, Lefille let out a grand sigh like she was fed up with her.

“Why are therianthropes all like this...?”

“It seems... it’s simply... in their nature.”

“Clarissa-dono is really the odd one out, I see.”

“Seems so.”

“Yup.”

Lefille, Liliana, and Felmenia all nodded repeatedly. As they continued to talk amongst themselves, the entrance flap to the tent was suddenly thrown open. A panting soldier jumped in with a great sense of urgency.

“R-Reporting!”

“What is it?!”

The one to address the soldier was the one at the center of the war council, Weitzer. The soldier then caught his breath and replied happily.

“The hero is returning to the camp!”

Hearing the good news, the tent was instantly filled with relieved voices. Weitzer, however, calmed them and addressed the soldier.

“Does this mean the hero is safe?”

“Indeed, Your Highness. She is walking towards the camp on her own feet.”

Lefille took the opportunity to ask the soldier a question of her own.

“Is she alone?”

“No, the young man in black is with her. In fact, Hero-sama seems to be the one lending him a shoulder to walk...”

Hearing that report, Lefille and Felmenia bolted out of their seats.

“Is he wounded?!”

“Is he alright?!”

Terribly startled by their sudden terrific shouting, the soldier fell backward onto his butt. But rather than the messenger, they cared far more about Suimei’s wellbeing, and as such, continued to question the man on the floor without restraint. Though completely bewildered, he somehow managed to answer them.

“Er, uh... No. From the looks of it, he does not appear to be injured, but it’s quite clear that he is not well, either.”

“Get to the point! Tell us what you mean, and clearly!”

“This is extremely important! Please pull yourself together!”

“Don’t be so unreasonable, you two. Come on, step back a bit.”

As Rumeya attempted to calm them, Liliana suggested a much easier and direct solution to the matter.

“Let’s go...”

At that, it was decided that the war council would be adjourned for the moment, and everyone inside the tent left in quick succession.



After passing through what was left of the darkwood forest, Suimei and Hatsumi had returned to Alliance territory. From there, they’d made their way to the main fortress, and were now safe within its protective walls. Hatsumi took a seat on a wooden box while Suimei plunked down on the ground to take a breather. It wasn’t long before Felmenia and the others came running over. Spotting them, Suimei waved at them with a smile.

“Yo. I’m back.”

“Welcome back, Suimei-dono. I’m so glad to see you safe.”

Felmenia sounded relieved. She held her hand out to Suimei, and from where he was sitting, he gave her a high five. Meanwhile, Liliana looked at him with a pleasant but astonished smile.

“You always wear yourself... to tatters, don’t you?”

“I can’t say anything back to that.”

“Welcome back... Are you alright?”

“Just wicked tired.”

Between his fatigue and mana exhaustion, Suimei could barely move. But apart from that, all of his injuries had already been healed. Watching this reunion scene unfold from the side, Hatsumi lightly cocked her head to the side.

“These people are...?”

“My companions.”

“I see... Not that I care, but it’s nothing but girls, huh?”

“Huh? Well... yeah.”

“Uhuh.”

Hatsumi looked at Suimei suspiciously. Suimei, however, unable to tell what had caused such a change in her attitude, simply looked back at her dumbfoundedly.

“What?”

“Nothing. At any rate, aren’t you just a little reckless? Despite coming to save me, I had to lend you my shoulder to return.”

“Yeah, well, what are you gonna do? It was a pain to walk on my own.”

“How lame.”

“I don’t have too much room to talk considering I came to save you of my own free will, but... just whose fault is it I ended up like this again?”

“Oof... When you put it like that, I can’t exactly argue...”

As Suimei looked at her with half closed eyes, Hatsumi could only groan. Serious by nature, she would never argue when confronted with the truth. And while they were having that little exchange, the next wave of people came out of the tent. Spotting Hatsumi sitting atop the box, Selphy dashed over to her.

“Hatsumi!”

With a cry of delight, Selphy threw her arms around her. Hatsumi was both surprised and flustered at the sudden embrace.

“Oomph! Selphy, hang on... If you suddenly do that...”

“Hatsumi... I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Thank you. Really, I’m safe because of all of you.”

When Selphy expressed her relief, Hatsumi replied in kind. They were both glad to see each other. And as things calmed down between them, Weitzer and Gaius—who had been watching from the side—at last called out to her.

“Hero-dono. Welcome back.”

“Thank you. And thank goodness you’re all safe.”

“Sweet. Now I can finally relax and have some booze.”

“That’s all you care about, isn’t it, Gaius?”

Going along with Gaius’s carefree attitude, laughter began to make its way through the group. Even Suimei, watching on from the smile, gave a broad grin.

“Hey, geezer. I did what I said I would do, didn’t I?”

“You sure are a piece of work, lad.”

There was a complicated expression on Suimei’s face as he looked away, but it wasn’t an unpleasant one. Rumeya, who at some point had seated herself on a nearby box, took the opportunity to call out to Suimei as she puffed on her pipe.

“I heard you had to borrow the hero’s shoulder.”

“Yes, that! Just what happened?!” Felmenia cut in. “For you to be unable to walk on your own...”

“Indeed, it’s strange... If all you’d done... was search for the hero... there should be no cause for this,” added Liliana.

“Was it demons?” asked Gaius.

“That’s... hard to imagine.”

Liliana had been the one to say it, but each and every member of Suimei’s party was nodding. In their eyes, no matter how many mere demons came flying at him, they could never be a threat to Suimei. Still waiting for an answer to the question at hand, however, Lefille raised an eyebrow.

“Well, Suimei-kun?”

“There was just one bad dude that showed up.”

“By that, you mean a demon general?” asked Gaius.

“Huh? A demon general?”

Suimei cocked his head to the side. Seeing that reaction, Hatsumi looked totally stunned.

“We did fight one, you know. Did you actually forget? You’re kidding, right? That’s just...”

Hearing Hatsumi’s dumbfounded tone, Suimei began rubbing his chin. Had there been something like that? Groaning like his head hurt, he looked up at the sky, then the ground, and then finally the light bulb came on.

“Hrm... Ah, oh yeah! The guy who used that shitty knockoff technique!”

“Seriously...?”

Hatsumi’s exasperated voice hung in the air. She never dreamed he would up and forget about it. Seeing her firmly plant her face in

the palm of her hand, Suimei could only smile bitterly. The shock of fighting Eanru had completely put their encounter with Vuishta out of his mind. Judging that she wouldn't be able to get to the point with Suimei like this, Selphy turned to Hatsumi and continued the conversation.

"Then a demon general really did appear?"

"Yes, and we fought him."

"Are you kidding? We destroyed him. A dweeby small fry like that is nothing. More importantly..."

"A-A demon general... a small fry...? A... dweeby small fry?"

Suimei sounded completely unconcerned, and Selphy began to mutter his words repeatedly in a dumbfounded tone from within her hood. To them, the demons were a major threat. It was hard to take what Suimei was saying seriously, and it wasn't just Selphy. Both Weitzer and Gaius were frowning as well. Urging on the conversation from there was Lefille.

"From the way you've been speaking," she said to Suimei, "some opponent other than the demon general was the one to put you in this state."

"Yeah."

After Suimei nodded, Hatsumi cut in.

"Thanks to Yakagi, we were able to defeat the demon general successfully, but after that, he showed up right away."

"And just who is 'he'?"

"He called himself a dragonnewt."

"Dra—?!"

"A dragonnewt?!"

Both Gaius and Weitzer yelled out in surprise. Hatsumi looked at the two of them curiously.

"...Is that bad?"

"B-Bad? You kiddin'? Rather than bad, I'd call it..."

Gaius was so seized by shock that he was unable to get to the point. Suimei looked around to get an answer from someone else, but every member of the group was making the same surprised expression. The only one who still seemed calm was Rumeiya, so he fixed his gaze on her.

"Wow, a dragonnewt, huh? They're a race that lives in the mountain range to the north of the Alliance. It's said that they have the strongest bodies of all the beings in this world. In truth, they are indeed outrageously powerful. They're not the type to stick their

snouts into worldly affairs, however. But you're saying you fought one of them?"

"Yeah."

"Don't tell me you absurdly did him in?"

"Not even close. It took everything I had just to end things in a draw, which was really more like a loss."

"Wonders never cease with you, do they?"

Even with that addendum slapped on to the end of Suimei's declaration, Rumeya's astonishment only increased. As their exchange drew to a close, Suimei looked to Lefille.

"I'd like to get your opinion on this too for perspective."

"I can confirm what Rumeya-dono said. Dragonnewts are strong. They inhabit land bordering demon territory, but not only have they not been destroyed, they're thriving. Despite being completely outnumbered, they have enough power to put up a fight with room to spare."

Hearing her say that, Suimei was reminded of Eanru's monologue when he first showed up.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, he did say something about demons being pests."

"Yeah, he did..." replied Hatsumi. "But this only confirms for me that he was a truly outrageous man."

As the two of them recalled what had happened and both sighed, Selphy raised a question.

"But why was a dragonnewt fighting with you two?"

"Who knows? He said he wanted to take Hatsumi along, but we weren't able to get more out of him."

"H-He wanted to take Hatsumi?!"

"He said he needed the hero's power or something. I wonder what for..."

As Suimei rubbed his chin, Weitzer let out a thunderous shout.

"You bastard, how could you not get such important intelligence?!"

"Huh?"

"This is an important matter concerning the hero's safety! To not get such an—"

"Aah, damn it, just shut the hell up already. He wasn't the kinda opponent you could get answers out of with force. Capisce? Or are you saying that you wanna go ask him yourself? From beginning to end, it was nothing but a trauma festival for me, you

hear? He was a dragon—a freaking dragon! Could *you* fight against a monster that could bring ruin to a world of seven billion people and life as we know it?! Huh?! HUH?!”

“Th-That...”

Suimei bared his fangs as he glared daggers at Weitzer. He was so angry he was practically growling. Seeing this, Felmenia and Lefille started to try and soothe him.

“Whoa, there...”

“What am I, a horse?!”

“Please calm down, Suimei-dono. This is not like you...”

“No shit! This guy’s driving me berserk!”

“Suimei-kun, you’re not making much sense anymore. Whatever you fought was different from the opponent you fought in your world, right?”

“Yes, but a dragon is a dragon—URRRGH!”

“We can’t have you acting violently now, Suimei-kun.”

“GYAAAAAAAHH! Lefi-san, I’m breaking! I’m seriously breaking! You’re pressing down too hard, daaamn iiit!”

As Lefille pinned down both his shoulders, everyone around them was observing them in bewilderment. Not just because of what they were doing, but because of what they were talking about.

“Suimei... This isn’t... like him...”

“He really must have been at his wits’ end. I have seen Suimei-dono act like this once before...”

Felmenia was reminded of when Suimei first came to this world and went on a rampage in the audience chamber. Back then, he completely lost his composure at the unreasonable situation thrust on him. He at least had the self-control not to go berserk with magicka, but he did apparently act his age every now and then. Before long, after Suimei managed to calm down, Gaius was the one to get the conversation back on track.

“Did you at least get his name?”

“Y-Yeah... He called himself Eanru.”

“Eanru, huh?”

“Hmm? Now then, just where have I heard that name before...?”

Gaius didn’t have a clue, but it seemed to ring a bell for Rumea. Suddenly realizing it for herself, Selphy’s face became completely pale.

“I too have heard that name before... Over a hundred years ago,

there was a terrifyingly strong dragonnewt who defeated the ‘Man-Eating Evil’ that nobody was said to be able to take down.”

“That’s who he was?” asked Suimei.

“If I remember right, my master told me his name was Eanru. It’s probably...”

“Good grief, so that crazy bastard was... Well, I guess if that was a hundred years ago, they’ve got hellaciously long lifespans, huh?”

Suimei let out a sigh like he was annoyed. Rumeya was the one to answer his question.

“Dragonnewts, elves, and dwarves are all similar in that they have long lifespans. I’ve also heard stories of the Man-Eating Evil too. That dragonnewt is probably already two hundred years old or so, I imagine.”

“Great. There are plenty of people in this world that live that long? That gives me chills.”

Suimei exaggeratedly grabbed his shoulders and trembled, and it was at that point that Felmenia joined the conversation.

“Is it bad if they live long?”

“Back in my world, most of the guys who live for a long time are dangerous. That’s kind of the standard. Even those who live for just a hundred years are all dangerous. Like, super dangerous.”

“Then for you to go so far, Suimei-dono...”

While Felmenia made a grim expression as she muttered, Suimei recalled the list of such monsters he’d come across. It included the leader of the Society, the chairman, the monster professor, and the Greed of Ten. They were all magicians who possessed dreadful power. During this pause in the conversation, Hatsumi spoke up.

“Is it alright with everyone if we bring this to a close? I’m alright, but...”

Hatsumi tossed a glance Suimei’s way. He didn’t even bother putting up a strong front.

“I just wanna sleep. Let’s call it a night here.”

Guessing that Hatsumi was also tired, he expressed his own desire to get some rest. It was a man’s job to stay tough in situations like this, but it would do the army well to see Hatsumi get some rest. Just as he was thinking of finding a place to do the same himself, Suimei stood up and suddenly felt a presence behind him. And as he tried to figure out who it was...

“Since you can’t move, Suimei-kun...”

“Huh?”

Just as he thought he heard Lefille’s voice, someone grabbed his arm. He was then lifted up and confusingly turned around in the air. By the time he realized what was going on, Suimei found himself on Lefille’s back.

“Wai— @ × ○ △ ?!”

“Suimei-kun, you’re speaking gibberish, you know?”

“Whatever! What the hell are you doing, Lefi-san?!”

“You seemed to be having trouble moving on your own, so I thought I would carry you?”

He was thankful for her consideration, but being a man carried on a woman’s back, he was getting weird looks from everyone.

“S-Stop, stop, stop it! Let me down! I’m fine, so just let me down!”

“No way. You’re tired, right? It’s better not to force yourself.”

“Forget forcing myself! Being carried by a girl is far too lame!”

“That’s too bad. This is what you get for using your power up to its limits.”

“That’s not my...”

He was going to say “fault,” but was suddenly distracted when he realized Rumeya was snickering at him.

“Heh heh heh...”

“Wha— You! Don’t laugh!”

“But, you know....”

“I don’t know, damn it! Menia, what the hell are you laughing for too?!”

“It’s just so unusual for Suimei-dono to be so intensely perturbed. Heehee...”

Felmenia pointed this out to him, but she was making a gentle smile the whole time. He was quickly running out of allies. Suimei was reaching his breaking point, but it didn’t stop Liliana from taking her turn.

“Suimei, accepting the goodwill of others... is the adult thing to do.”

Those ever-so-innocent words were what dealt the final blow. In the end, judging that he would be unable to escape his fate of being carried away, Suimei could only grandly scream out his resentment.

“God daaaaaamn iiiiiiiit! You guys, I’ll fucking remember

thiiiiiiiis!”

After spending a night resting in the fortress, Suimei’s party returned to Miazen.

Chapter 2: Seeking the Hero's Weapon

With the third imperial princess of the Empire, Graziella Filas Rieseld, now accompanying them on their journey, Reiji's party arrived at the self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance. It lay in the west end of the northern region, and was a long, narrow territory that overlooked the ocean much like Chile in South America.

The puzzling title of "the self-governed state of the Saadias Alliance" came from its history of repeatedly joining and leaving the Saadias Alliance over administrative problems and events like the rise of the tyrant. Because of that, its official name had never been solidified. Currently, its regional administration was entrusted to an autonomous parliament independent of the sovereign state Miazen.

After arriving at the border, Reiji and the others boarded a carriage prepared by the Church of Salvation, and were now headed towards the center of the self-governed state, the city of Attila. Following behind the carriage were the three knights from Astel, as well as several of Graziella's subordinates from the imperial army. Riding along in the carriage was Reiji's party of four. Because of their previous hostilities with Graziella, they thought it would be impossible to get along with her before leaving the Empire, but...

"Listen to this! When we were in the audience chamber in the Empire, when His Imperial Majesty looked down at me, he was scowling, you hear?! I didn't even do anything! Don't you think that's mean?!"

"Truly, he's like that with absolutely everyone. He only holds back a little with relatives and close associates. But that man... He pushed this duty on me despite always treating the word of the Goddess and the church as nothing but nonsense. It's only at these incomprehensible times that he lends an ear. There's got to be a limit to his emotional instability."

"Oh, and...! Duke Hadorious, was it?! That guy is *super* evil! He sets traps for people, you know? And he takes hostages, you know?"

And he bothers Reiji, you know?!”

“Hmph. All those men who pretend to be important are complete good-for-nothings.”

“Right?!”

For some reason, Mizuki and Graziella were having a perfectly casual, gossiping conversation in the carriage. The targets of their complaints were the terrifying Nelferian emperor and Duke Hadorious. Even Graziella had just insulted them both. Timed alongside the rattling sounds of the carriage as it rolled down the road was their nonstop chatter as they continued to stir themselves up. Titania eventually looked over at the two of them curiously.

“Mizuki... is surprisingly not a timid child in the least.”

Hearing the words she’d spoken out loud in wonderment, Reiji responded from next to her.

“Really. To think that meek girl could talk about someone like that.”

“There’s that, but I am also surprised that she has already reached the point of being able to talk with Her Imperial Highness Graziella on equal terms...”

The person Mizuki was chattering on with so genuinely was a member of an imperial family. Graziella had previously told them not to be reserved with her, but they’d only been together as a group a short time. Reiji and Titania still couldn’t help speaking politely to her, as well as minding their words and manners in her presence.

The reason none of this applied to Mizuki was partially because she was simply ignorant. As a modern high school girl, she could scarcely grasp the absurd concept of *lèse-majesté* at all. However, fundamentally...

“It’s because Mizuki can get along with just about anyone. Whether it’s how she immediately closes the sense of distance between her and other people, or how the people she talks to somehow never think that she’s being rude... It’s one of Mizuki’s good points.”

“But you also know her bad points too, right? Heehee...”

“Hahaha, well, yeah... It was all quite the disaster. In more ways than one.”

Reiji returned a dry laugh to Titania’s smile. With what had first come to mind when she mentioned Mizuki’s bad points, he suddenly felt tired. Seeing his expression, Titania had an idea of

what he was talking about.

“Could it be... that serious illness I heard of before called chuunibyou?”

“Yeah, it’s a terrifying thing. Mizuki’s case was quite severe, you see. On top of talking completely incomprehensible nonsense, she wrought the unthinkable.”

“The unthinkable, you say?”

“Yeah. They say that thunderstorms start as the tiny gust of air from a butterfly’s flapping wings. In a frighteningly similar fashion, the things Mizuki said had all kinds of ridiculous effects on her surroundings and ramifications you would never believe.”

“I don’t quite follow, but I suppose I get what you’re trying to say.”

“Mm. Suimei called it a kind of curse that induced recognition bias, or a transmitted curse that becomes a repetitive spiral of fear, or something like that.”

“Suimei said that?”

“Back in the early days, Suimei also said a bunch of incomprehensible things. With a completely serious face, too. Though he was nastier, there was more truth to his nonsense than Mizuki’s. Whenever weird things would happen around us, he was always right there with us, though.”

“Reiji-sama... Could it not be that Suimei was actually the one causing such situations?”

“In a way, you may be right. Mizuki would be four parts, my meddling would be four parts, and Suimei would be the remaining two parts out of ten or something...”

Reiji looked out the window with a far-off gaze. Watching him like that, Titania fell silent. Meanwhile, Mizuki’s idle conversation with Graziella had ended, and she put on a smile as she leaned in towards Reiji.

“Hey, Reiji-kun, what were you talking about with Tia just now?”

“Huh? Oh, nothing in particular.”

Reiji didn’t think that she could have possibly been listening. But just as he was regretting saying too much, he was betrayed.

“Just a little about your past, Mizuki. Reiji-sama was filling me in, weren’t you?”

“T-Tia?!”

“Oooh, Reiji-kuuun! You know that I have a heap of stuff about

my past that I don't want people to know, right?! RIGHT?!"

"But most of that is just reaping what you sow..."

"That may be so! That may be so, buuut..."

Mizuki was gripping both of Reiji's shoulders while violently shaking him back and forth. As she was getting her adorable revenge on him, Graziella cut in to the conversation.

"Oh? I'm quite interested in Mizuki's past. Tell me about it too. It seems amusing."

"No, it's fine! Graziella-san doesn't need to hear it!"

"What? Am I the only one being left out?"

"That's not it, but— Aah, geez! This is all your fault, Reiji-kun!"

Yelling in distress, Mizuki just shook him even harder. In the end, Reiji—the main reason for her tantrum—was the one to calm her down. Seeing this all unfold, Graziella flashed a smile.

"It doesn't get dull here, does it?"

"That does seem to be the case, does it not? The two of them are quite cheerful, after all."

After agreeing with a smile, Titania's expression took a turn for the serious. She then looked at Graziella, who was still watching Reiji and Mizuki.

"But is this really alright, Your Imperial Highness?"

"What?"

"For you to take action alongside us."

"Regarding that, did I not communicate that there was nothing that could be done about it? The Goddess has spoken."

"I understand, but what I am asking about is that with the current state of the Empire, is it fine for you to be away from the imperial capital?"

Hearing Titania's roundabout question, Graziella shrugged her shoulders in exasperation.

"For a foreign princess to worry about our country is something else indeed. Could Your Royal Highness be plotting to prey upon the weakness of the Empire?"

"While the demons are getting stronger, discord and antagonism between fellow humans is simply foolish. A crisis between allied nations could be said to be as bad as a civil war."

"That's certainly true."

"So?"

"Aah, honestly speaking, I didn't want to leave. Because of that incomprehensible disturbance, despite the scoundrels out there

decreasing in number, the power of the nobles has also been somewhat diminished. And I can't deny that the war potential of the Empire has declined, either. Even if that wasn't the case, relations with all the neighboring countries have deteriorated."

"I do recall Your Imperial Highness invading Astel's territory at your own discretion."

"That may in fact have been overbearing, but in reality, was it not a necessity? It was because that man defeated most of the demons before I arrived that my act of goodwill was taken poorly."

It was true. Astel and Nelferia were allied nations. If they had fought together that day against the hordes of demons, Graziella's actions would probably have been praised. But with the threat diminished, she only ended up being criticized for being hasty. Considering her actions were a wager to improve the reputation of the Empire, however, she hadn't done anything ill-intentioned. Kicking away Titania's poisonous words, Graziella gazed off in the direction of the Empire.

"I have my misgivings. Now that the number of nobles that can take their place on the battlefield has decreased, if the demons launched a large-scale attack on the Empire, it would be a serious blow to us. And with the current state of affairs, it's entirely possible that our allied nations would not raise a hand to help us as it happened."

"In other words, the Empire would end up having to fight all on their own, no?"

The reason she was troubled about being unable to get the cooperation of other nations was not simply a matter of reinforcements. The Empire would also lose access to strategic points along its supply lines. Goods, information, and many other forms of support would stagnate. It would be devastating in terms of battle. Because the Empire was such a vast nation, its relationship with the surrounding territories was vital.

"Now, just who is it pulling the strings from behind the scenes..."

Hearing Graziella mutter that in a troubled voice, one man came to Reiji's mind.

Duke Hadorious.

Remembering the figure of the duke sitting at the desk in his office, Reiji stood perfectly still where he was. His hunch hit him like an electric shock. Seeing him abruptly go stiff, Mizuki cocked

her head to the side.

“Reiji-kun, what’s wrong?”

“No...”

Without giving a real answer, Reiji started to turn his thoughts over in his head. It was only a possibility, but Hadorious might be pulling the strings behind the scenes. He might have even manipulated things so that Graziella came along with them.

That would mean that he was the one to leak information to Graziella about the demon attack in Astel, which would line up with what Suimei had guessed. Suimei annihilating the demon forces was unexpected, certainly, but Suimei had still been used as a decoy. Even if Hadorious ordered Gregory to take Reiji and his party somewhere safe, it would have been easy to predict they’d come running to save their friend. And if they just happened to run into Graziella there... With Gregory’s family hostage, it was a simple matter for Hadorious to coerce them into going to the Empire.

But if that were really the case, Graziella joining their party didn’t seem to add up. Hadorious wanted to keep Graziella in check, which is why he’d sent Reiji and his party to the Empire to keep an eye on her. And in order to observe her in her role as princess, they would’ve had to stay in the Empire.

On top of that, there was no consistency in Hadorious pressuring the church in order to control Graziella. Once Graziella joined them, they were free to move and do as they pleased. It would be a different story if his intent was to have Graziella join their party from the start, but it seemed far too roundabout. If he was going to put pressure on the church, it would have been simpler to do that from the start and have her join up with them when they first met. Moreover, Graziella’s command to join them had allegedly come from an oracle of the Goddess herself.

“The Church of Salvation and Duke Hadorious...”

Hearing Reiji suddenly mutter that, Mizuki questioned him.

“What about them?”

“I was thinking the reason we’re in this situation might be because of them, is all.”

“What do you mean?” Titania asked.

“As Her Imperial Highness suggested earlier, if someone is jerking us around, I think we can say for certain that they’re involved.”

“You mean to say that the Church of Salvation and Duke

Hadorious got together to orchestrate this?” chimed in Graziella.

“No, that would be hard to imagine. If that were the case, I don’t think things would have panned out in such a roundabout fashion.”

“Hmm...”

Hearing Reiji’s thoughts, Graziella began stroking her jaw. Since this involved her, she couldn’t just ignore it. Meanwhile, Titania gave her own opinion on the matter.

“Duke Hadorious’s territory is adjacent to the Empire, so if the Empire becomes isolated, it would likely be a welcome development for him.”

“My, that’s certainly a blunt denunciation of a lord from your own country, is it not?”

“I hate that man.”

“Because you lost.”

“Urgh!”

Graziella landed a bullseye, causing Titania to let out an unusual groan. While they were having this exchange, Mizuki recalled hearing about this before.

“Tia lost? Ah, now that you mention it, Luka-san said something about that once...”

“It’s nothing! Please do not pay it any mind!”

The princess of Astel was frantically trying to change the subject, waving her hands in a rather wild and unprincessly fashion. Fortunately for her, Mizuki didn’t actually seem all that interested in pressing the matter.

“But even if that’s true, why would he do that, I wonder? I can kinda get the church getting involved, but Duke Hadorious...” she said.

“I also don’t know. I guess we’ll have to talk to Suimei about it again, huh?”

“You’re right. It’s no surprise we’re lost without him, huh?”

In their little group of three, Suimei always played the brains. He was an indispensable member of the team. As Reiji and Mizuki wished he was there, Graziella called out to Reiji.

“At any rate, Reiji, you really value that man quite a lot, don’t you?”

“That man?... as in, Suimei? Mm, well, yeah, I do.”

“Suimei-kun is really reliable when there’s trouble. He’s always coming up with ideas that we’d never have thought of.”

“And at times when everyone else is panicking, Suimei always keeps his cool.”

“But then again... he blows his cool at the weirdest times. He’s always disappearing, too...”

If it weren’t for that...

Thinking that with a bitter smile, Mizuki sighed. Graziella then leaned over so she could speak with Titania privately.

“Reiji and Mizuki do not know of his true strength, correct?”

“That’s right. However, they do seem to know that he is very cunning at critical times.”

“In other words, he’s too meddlesome to be able to conceal it all, huh? What a naive man.”

“The reason Suimei’s conduct seems so unstable is probably because he finds himself stuck between the things he wants to do and the things that he must do. If you think of it like that, even his actions up to this point make sense.”

“Oh?”

“Well, I do also believe it’s mostly because he’s awkward.”

Titania gave her honest impression of Suimei, and found Graziella looking at her strangely.

“...What is it?”

“I was just thinking that the reason you’re speaking so bitterly about that man is perhaps because you also lost to him.”

As Graziella implicitly pointed out that Titania was a sore loser, her face turned bright red from shame.

“Absolutely not!” she yelled.

“As I thought. My goodness. Contrary to your refined appearance, you really are quite the sore loser aren’t you, Your Royal Highness Titania?”

“You certainly have no room to talk, Your Imperial Highness Graziella! In the end, you were also completely outwitted by Suimei, were you not?!”

Titania shouted to hide her embarrassment as she threw Graziella’s words back at her. In the end, it didn’t change the fact that the both of them were irritated over having more losses than wins when it came to Suimei, but neither wanted to admit it. While they were bickering, Titania noticed that Reiji and Mizuki were watching her little outburst intently.

“...Whatever is the matter, Mizuki?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking you two get along

unexpectedly well.”

“I do *not* particularly get along with Her Imperial Highness!”

“That’s right, Mizuki. Don’t misunderstand. I also have no intention of making friends with Her Royal Highness.”

They both denied it, but Reiji and Mizuki were already convinced.

“But you know...”

“Right?”

As they gave each other knowing smiles, Titania yelled out once more.

“You too, Reiji-sama?!”

“I believe this is your fault, isn’t it, Your Royal Highness? If you hadn’t asked in the first place, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“Why are you acting like a victim?! Were you not talking nonstop as well?!”

“What did you just say?”

“What?!”

And so the two princesses continued to quarrel. The carriage would stay full of their shouting until the coachman informed them that they’d reached their destination.

Because they had sent a messenger to the Church of Salvation beforehand, everything proceeded smoothly after they arrived. It seemed that the relic Reiji and the others were looking for was actually kept somewhere off of church grounds. So after finishing their greetings with the head bishop, they boarded another carriage and were taken to a large temple a little outside the city.

A large building made of gypsum with a large dome was surrounded by a great many stone pillars. The temple looked like a merger between the Greek Parthenon and the Roman Pantheon. It was an impressive sight, and that impression only grew stronger as they approached. Mizuki was particularly enthralled, staring at it like she was in awe of a World Heritage site.

“Whooooa... It’s amazing!”

As she shouted, Mizuki began running about like a child. Titania called out to her, sounding like a concerned mother.

“Mizuki, if you run around like that, you’ll trip, you know?”

“It’s fine! The shoes I got from Suimei-kun are super high quality, so they’re even more comfortable and perform better than my sneakers from home! I can run and skip and hop and jump all

over the place with these! Look!”

Pointing at her boots made of an unknown animal leather, she happily began prancing about to show them off. Titania followed her with an astonished yet gentle smile. Lagging behind a bit were Reiji, Graziella, and the escorts. After a short walk, they found themselves at the temple entrance where a number of guides from the Church of Salvation wearing religious habits were lined up waiting for them. It seemed they'd been informed of the hero's arrival beforehand. One of the nuns stepped forward as a representative for the group.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Faylia, the one who has been entrusted with the care of this temple. I wholeheartedly welcome you, Hero-sama, our guest from another world. You as well, Your Highnesses.”

After introducing herself and welcoming them, Faylia gave a deep bow and removed her hood, revealing white hair and long, tapered ears. With green eyes and pink lips, she was a fair and fascinatingly elegant elf. She appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties. She was dressed plainly, but the color of her prominently luscious lips alone gave her an otherworldly sex appeal. While Mizuki was admiringly going on about how pretty she was, Reiji stepped forward to return Faylia's greeting.

“I am Shana Reiji. I'd like to thank you for taking time out of your busy day to meet with us.”

“Thank you for your considerations, Hero-sama, but we are not particularly busy here.”

“You're too kind. Please accept my humble thanks nonetheless.”

Faylia smiled playfully, and Reiji gave her a refreshing smile in return. Watching them from the side, Graziella spoke to the others.

“I see. So he's a sweet-talker...”

“That's Reiji-kun for you. It doesn't matter who it is, that's just his default way of interacting with people...”

While Graziella and Mizuki were discussing such matters, Reiji began to follow after Faylia, who led him into the temple. It seemed they were going to walk while talking. The inside of the temple was somewhat gloomy. The lights coming from the ceiling looked like sunlight shining through prison bars. But the building had a reverence to it, like a cathedral in the early morning. As they walked along, Faylia cut to the matter at hand.

“I have already been apprised of your story. You would like to

take charge of the relic, correct?”

“Yes. I was hoping that you would be kind enough to allow me to use it.”

“I don’t mind placing it in your care, but I don’t know whether or not the relic you seek will be of any help to you, Reiji-sama.”

“The hero of El Meide informed me that it chooses its user. Is that right?”

“Yes. And so far, no one has ever been able to take possession of the weapon left behind by the hero of old, so I do not know if it will yield you any assistance...”

“That’s quite alright. All I ask is for the chance to see if I myself can wield it, if you’d be so kind.”

Hearing his courteous request, Faylia replied with a nod and a smile. Meanwhile, Graziella was looking around the interior of the building with a dubious expression.

“They have something like that here?”

Hearing her skeptical tone, Titania spoke up.

“Your Imperial Highness, do you know of this place?”

“I’ve only visited here once before. I was given a tour much like this, but I hardly recall anything of interest. It says something that they didn’t want to show me their treasures.”

Saying that, Graziella frowned in discontent. If Suimei were around, he would undoubtedly have a comment, something along the lines of: “No duh.” But at Graziella’s mention of it, Titania took a look around at their surroundings as well.

“Certainly, it does look like there is nothing here, but...”

“Indeed, there’s nothing here. There must be a place for keeping relics and such deep inside, so the temple is mostly just for appearance’s sake.”

“So... basically this is just a glorified storage shed?”

“Mizuki, that is putting it a little too bluntly...” said Titania in a tired voice.

She looked like she had a headache after hearing Mizuki’s grade schooler-like impression. Mizuki, on the other hand, paid her no mind and turned her attention to Faylia.

“Faylia-san, this place is awfully pretty. How long has it been around?”

“Ever since the tyrant was defeated. In those days, there was an urgent need to seal away those relics, so a small storage area was made here. After that, we built the solid temple around it that we’re

standing in now.”

After a short pause, Mizuki cocked her head to the side.

“You sound like you were part of it.”

“Indeed, I saw it all happen.”

“Heh?”

Mizuki made a comical noise, but Faylia only looked at her with a gentle smile. Unable to tell whether she was being serious or not, Reiji felt obliged to ask.

“Um, I know that it is rude to ask about a lady’s age, but... Faylia-san, how old are you?”

“I haven’t properly counted, but I turned five hundred a little while ago.”

“Th-Th-Th-Th-That old?!”

“A-As expected of an elf...”

Reiji sounded bewildered, but Mizuki stood there dumbfounded with her mouth hanging wide open. It had been quite a while since they’d come to this world, but this was their first time meeting someone centuries old. It was indeed quite a shock. It was unremarkable, however, for Titania and Graziella, neither of whom seemed the slightest bit fazed.

“So, were you acquainted with the hero who used the relic?”

“Yes, I met him when I was quite young.”

“What kind of person was he?”

“The hero of my day was famous for three things: he had extensive knowledge that surpassed anyone’s, he held a great power, and he saved this land from the hand of the tyrant.”

After walking and talking for a while, they arrived at a room deep inside the temple.

“Is this it?”

“No, that which you seek is kept under watch in a room further inside.”

“Hmm? Then what’s this, Faylia-san?”

“Ah, this?”

Faylia took down a wooden box from the shelf and opened it up so Reiji and the others could see. Inside, there was something that had a shape similar to a pocket watch from the modern world.

Considering it would be easier for them to see for themselves, Faylia took it out of the box and handed it over to Reiji. As Reiji got a closer look, it really did strike him as a pocket watch. There were symbols written along the circumference of it that resembled

Roman numerals that clearly weren't of this world, and it had curved needles that looks like an hour and minute hand. It was quite a mysterious device.

"What is it?"

"It is called the Lachesis Meter. Along with the Sacrament, it was something the hero of old left behind."

While listening to her explanation, Reiji looked for the crown of the watch, but there didn't seem to be any sort of spring mechanism to make it move.

"It's not moving. How does one use it?"

"That... We do not know either."

"You don't know? Was its use not passed down along with the item?"

"The hero did not give us a detailed explanation of it at the time. He said that it was likely irrelevant to this world. And unlike the Sacrament, it does appear to be completely meaningless."

"Completely meaningless...?"

"You see, the hero said the end of the world has not yet begun here."

"The end of the world hasn't begun?"

"Yes."

The hero's words relayed to Reiji by Faylia struck him as quite odd. The end of the world was exactly that—an end. It wasn't a meaningful expression of time. There was no beginning to it per se. By the time it happened, everything would already be over. The phrasing puzzled Reiji and the others quite a bit, and Faylia offered an apology.

"I do not fully understand myself. When he spoke of the end of the world, he described it as something that was predetermined once it began, but he explained it with vocabulary that was largely beyond my comprehension. In the end, we didn't pay it much attention because he said it was irrelevant, and we left it at that."

With that, Faylia concluded her explanation of the Lachesis Meter. Reiji and the others judged that spending any more time on it would be meaningless, and moved on to the main point.

"So, could we see the other relic he left behind?"

"About that... I must offer my apologies, but we cannot go any further."

As she gestured towards deeper into the temple, Faylia apologized. It sounded like she was going back on her word, and

Titania questioned her with a somewhat sharp tone.

“What do you mean? I do believe you were informed of what we came here for.”

“Before you stands the Hero of Salvation. Are you saying you will not cooperate with us?” demanded Graziella.

“No, I do not mean that we refuse to surrender the relic. It’s just that access to the Sacrament is strictly controlled. The door was sealed by the hero of old’s magic, and undoing it will require a ritual performed by myself and several specialist mages. It will take nearly half a day.”

“So we can’t go through yet?”

“Precisely. We will let you through as soon as the preparations are complete, but that will likely have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow... That’s quite strict.”

Graziella, whose stiffened shoulders suddenly fell slack, felt like they were on a fool’s errand. She was probably thinking that if they weren’t going to hand it over right away, there was no need to drag them through the temple today. Mizuki, however, had a different question.

“It’s supposed to be something that can’t be used by just anyone, right? So why do you have to go so far?”

“The hero of old said that it was not something that should exist here. He told us that it had a tremendous power that could twist the very principles of our world. And so, to prevent its power from being studied and recreated, it was sealed along with the tyrant’s relics.”

Faylia’s explanation was noble, but came across as a bit over the top to Reiji. Pondering what she’d said, he was left with one big question in particular.

“And just what is this tremendous power?”

“From what I have seen, it is a power that can freeze all creation.”

“All creation?”

“Yes. The hero said it held sway over anything and everything in existence. They say that there was nothing that the Sacrament’s power was unable to freeze. Even the other heroes of the day said it was an exceptional weapon. Under the right circumstances, they said it was capable of slaying even gods.”

“S-Slaying gods, you say?”

“Are you saying that it’s such an overpowered weapon that it

would bring about such conceit?”

Hearing Faylia’s explanation, Graziella and Titania showed their surprise and indignation. To the people of this world living under the Goddess Alshuna, the idea of killing a god had a blasphemous implication. As if to defend the hero of old, Faylia shook her head.

“No, its original purpose seemed to be different.”

The first to pick up on what she meant was Mizuki.

“Could it be... something related to ‘the end of the world’ you mentioned?”

“Yes. The Sacrament was made to forestall that event, which in turn made it a preposterously strong weapon.”

“That’s what’s kept here...?”

Reiji gazed at the door leading further into the temple as if staring through it. What he was thinking about was the weapon that lay beyond. A weapon that could forestall the end of the world—a weapon that could save the world. It would be within his grasp soon, but doubt that it would deem him worthy was coming and going in the deep recesses of his heart.



The ritual to undo the seal would begin that night, which meant that the relic would only be accessible the following day. Reiji and the others parted with Faylia for the time being and boarded their carriage again to return to Attila.

Inside the carriage, there was a strange, stuffy atmosphere that made it hot and uncomfortable. But it was only natural. The explanation they’d heard from Faylia would agitate anyone. Even Titania, who was always calm, was restlessly moving her legs.

Similarly, Reiji was also unable to cool his excitement. He might be on the verge of obtaining a powerful weapon—something extraordinary that nobody else had been able to use since the time of the hero who brought it to this world. He didn’t feel like a “chosen one,” but it was nice to think that he might be. He wanted to get his hands on it as soon as possible and find out. Ruminating on all of this, he gazed down at the palms of his hands. It was then that Mizuki called out to him.

“Hey, hey! Reiji-kun!”

“Hmm? What’s up, Mizuki?”

"I was thinking about something Faylia-san said. Did you not notice?" she asked, putting a little extra emphasis on her question.

"Notice what?" Reiji asked in turn.

Mizuki made a grim face before continuing.

"Well, earlier, Faylia-san showed us that relic called the Lachesis Meter, right?"

"Mm, that's right. What about it?"

"Think about it. 'Meter' is English. And 'Lachesis'... If I remember right, that's the name of some god."

"I don't know much about gods, but you're right about the 'meter' part."

She was right, but Reiji didn't really think it was anything they needed to be concerned about. And as he looked at Mizuki curiously for making a big deal out of it, she started to grow frustrated that he didn't understand.

"Augh... *Really* think about it, Reiji-kun."

Reiji did as he was asked and tried thinking about it again. He went over what happened in his head, and couldn't remember anything strange about anything Faylia had said or done while she was talking about the relic. It seemed like Mizuki had fixated on the name of the item—the Lachesis Meter. That's what Faylia had called it. And...

"Ah! The movements of her mouth!"

When he realized what Mizuki was talking about, Reiji suddenly jumped to his feet in the carriage. Seeing that he'd finally put it together, Mizuki was happily nodding her head repeatedly.

"Exactly! Faylia-san actually said 'Lachesis Meter' in English. In other words, she was using language from our world."

"So it's language from your world, is it? Your Royal Highness, you try saying it."

Because it was used to describe something that wasn't of this world, there was no equivalent for it in the native tongue. That being the case, the magical translation shouldn't work on it and Reiji and Mizuki should hear exactly what Titania said instead. It being a completely foreign phrase to her, her pronunciation was far from perfect.

"Pfft..."

"Heh..."

Hearing the weird way Titania had said "Lachesis Meter," Mizuki and Reiji were unable to keep their snickering to

themselves.

“Please don’t laugh, the both of you! Good grief!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Titania had gone completely red from embarrassment, and Reiji apologized. Meanwhile, the person who’d tricked her into saying it—Graziella—was smirking contentedly. Titania huffed as she turned her gaze on Graziella. Seeing them like this, they really did seem to get along like sisters. But setting that aside...

“That means the person who brought the relic here was from our world, too.”

That seemed to be the logical conclusion considering the name. It was highly unlikely other worlds used the English language. That was what Reiji thought, but Mizuki’s mind was somewhere else.

“That may be. But in that case...”

According to legend, three heroes were summoned to this world to defeat the tyrant. One was the wielder of the Sacrament, and the other two were mages. The story went that they were all from the same world.

“You mean... that there are also mages in our world?”

Reiji caught his breath. The ultimate conclusion he’d arrived at was absolutely shocking. He could scarcely believe that the stuff of sword and sorcery novels really—secretly—existed in his world. He was inarticulate at just the thought. But while he was sorting through his feelings, he could hear a creepy chuckle coming from beside him.

“Heh heh heh... Amazing, just amazing! Reiji-kun, Reiji-kun! Magic really exists! In *our* world! It’s like the curtain to a great dream has finally been lifted!”

“Mizuki, that’s corny...”

“Whatever! You don’t need to retort every single time!”

Mizuki puffed out her cheeks in response to Reiji’s quip. But she was too excited to stay like that for long. She quickly began smiling again, and wouldn’t stop for quite some time.

“This means you and Suimei-kun can’t say I have chuunibyou anymore! Rather, I’ll finally be able to prove that I was right all along!”

“Wherever you are... I’m sorry, Suimei.”

Mizuki’s laughter echoed through the carriage and completely drowned out Reiji’s heavy sigh. The two princesses listening in on their conversation couldn’t help wondering who was really

deserving of pity here. Watching their antics, Graziella spoke up.

“But to think that the hero of old and his companions were summoned from the same world...”

“It just means that kind of thing happens, is all. Sort of like the three of us. It might just be that it’s easier to summon people from our world.”

Reiji was thinking something along those lines, but Mizuki seemed to have a somewhat different take on it. She shared her theory with a grin.

“But we still don’t know, right? It’s just a possibility at this point. It’s also possible there are really parallel worlds involved.”

“Parallel worlds?” asked Titania.

“Yeah. Parallel worlds are nearly identical, but each one has a different future. For example, I ended up getting summoned here, but the me in a parallel world might still be happy at home.”

“That sounds... rather complicated.”

“Huh... Yeah, I guess it is, isn’t it?”

Wrinkling her brow, Titania was making a stern expression as Mizuki forced a smile. As expected, a rather unadvanced world like this didn’t have the imagination to keep up with her.

“But, Mizuki, if there are many other worlds like that, doesn’t that mean there would be multiple versions of me? There’s no way that could be.”

“But there’s *this* whole other world, right? You can’t really deny the possibility.”

“Is this related to the hero summoning?”

“Don’t you think it’s a big deal that we were summoned to another world? Travelling between worlds isn’t something that can be accomplished even with science.”

“Hmph...”

Hearing Mizuki’s explanation, Graziella seemed somewhat convinced. She then leaned over to Titania.

“If we ask that man, we may be able to learn something.”

“You have a point. Suimei probably knows about this. But...”

With Mizuki thinking she’d won some victory over Suimei with this knowledge, if she found out the truth, she would be devastated. Titania could picture it clearly already. She imagined Mizuki shouting at the top of her lungs, “Breach of friendship! Breach of friendship!”



After staying the night at an inn in Attila, Reiji and the others once more set out for the temple that kept the relic. They waited in the room they'd visited the previous day for Faylia, who arrived later than planned.

"I apologize for making you wait."

"No, don't worry about it. More importantly, has the seal already been released?" asked Reiji.

"Yes," she said with a nod. "We finished releasing all the seals this morning. You may now enter whenever you like. Please, come this way."

With that, Faylia extended her hand towards the door. Seeing that it was time, Titania gave an order to her retinue of knights.

"All of you, wait here. Gregory, you're in charge."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Gregory gave a bow in acknowledgement of her command. Luka, on the other hand, looked fidgety like she'd wanted to go in with them. Roffrey tried to soothe her, assuring her they could see it later when Reiji returned with it.

Graziella too ordered her soldiers to stand by at the entrance. Seeing this all unfold, Mizuki realized something and leaned over to mention it to Reiji privately.

"Tia's knights and the Empire soldiers seem to get along just fine, huh?"

"You're right. They're soldiers from allied countries, so maybe we were worried for nothing."

That had been one of their concerns about bringing Graziella along. They were worried fighting might break out between their respective escorts, but because they drew the line quite distinctly between themselves, they hadn't been at odds with each other even once.

Overhearing all this, Titania and Graziella joined in on their secret conversation.

"The Empire is an allied nation, after all. At least on the surface."

"The men following me are the ones most suited to give me counsel. They are all skilled soldiers who have a long record of military service. As for Astel's knights, Gregory-dono is present. He should be able to keep the others in line."

“O-Oh,ahaha...”

The two princesses seemed to have a firm grasp on their own affairs. Titania had said things were fine on the surface, implying that in reality, sparks were flying just underneath that. A little unsure how to take all this, all Mizuki could do was laugh dryly.

As the group followed Faylia down a candle-lit corridor, they came upon a staircase leading downward.

“It’s underground?”

“Yes. We will need to descend a little, but it is just beyond here.”

They began descending the staircase, and partway down, the appearance of the passage completely changed. Up until now, everything had been done in the same style and materials as the rest of the temple, but the walls now became bare rock that made it look like a cave. Impressed with the sensation they were entering a limestone cavern, the group followed Faylia. Before long, they came upon an enormous boulder.

“Is this... a grotto?”

“We’re inside the temple, right?”

The storage area had a completely different feel to it than the rest of the temple. Curious, Reiji stepped forward and asked Faylia about it.

“Faylia-san, why is only this part of the temple so different?”

“Regarding the location of the seal, it was the heroes’ idea. They claimed that if the seal were in the temple itself, its magic might be compromised and weakened by the mysticism of the Goddess. And so they had to make another mystical space, or something like that.”

“Hwah?”

Mizuki made a strange, puzzled sound. Feeling much the same way, Reiji didn’t follow either. Seeing the confusion on his face, Faylia seemed to read his mind and tried explaining further.

“What the hero told us was that the sealing spell used was originally a technique used to suppress the power of gods, so being near the power of a god would weaken it and vice versa. Something along those lines.”

“Tia, is that true?”

“My apologies. This is also the first I have heard of it.”

Reiji shifted his gaze over to Graziella after Titania, but it didn’t seem she knew either. She only shrugged her shoulders as she shook

her head. But for two serious mages to be clueless on the matter, Reiji couldn't help thinking it was odd.

"Now then, please step back a little."

Urged by Faylia, Reiji and the others took a bit of distance. When they did, Faylia recited something in front of the boulder and a magic circle rose to the surface around it. A high-pitched buzzing suddenly assaulted everyone's ears. Before long, the giant boulder made a sound like it was being dragged along the ground, and started to move as it split to the sides. It released stale air that had been trapped inside of it, which smelled much like rotten eggs.

"Urgh... This is somewhat harsh."

Graziella reflexively grimaced at the stench. Unexpectedly, Faylia also pinched her nose and turned away from the boulder.

"This stench is because of one of the books the tyrant possessed. Everything around it becomes covered in moisture and eventually decomposes."

Hearing that explanation, Mizuki raised an anxious question.

"Is it safe?"

"Yes. Regarding anything that leaks out of it, it no longer contains enough power to harm a human."

"Thank goodness..."

While Mizuki expressed her relief with a sigh, Reiji was doing the same internally. Faylia then pointed at the culprit of the stench with her finger.

"This is the tome I just mentioned."

Beyond Faylia's supple finger was a dark bound book atop a pedestal. It had an ominous appearance; just looking at it was enough to make one uncomfortable. Upon closer inspection, despite the fact that the pedestal was made of metal, it looked somewhat melted and had stalactite-like drippings coming off of it. Based on what Faylia said, this gave a glimpse into the strange book's power.

Graziella seemed intrigued by the book and drew nearer to it. Quick to respond, Faylia raised a fierce voice and called for her to stop.

"Halt!"

"What is it? Suddenly raising your voice like that..."

"Pardon me... But that is something that must never be touched, so I had no choice but to be a little forceful."

"Must never be touched?"

"That's right. If a human touches it even once, the evil god that

manipulated the tyrant would take them over and turn them into a thrall. Then the nightmare of an age past would repeat itself all over again.”

Hearing Faylia’s explanation, Mizuki raised a puzzled voice.

“Huh? Wasn’t he defeated and everything was solved?”

“The tyrant was felled, but the existence that drove him to madness was not. As a god, it wasn’t something that mere mortals could contend with. Or so the story goes.”

“What about the relic you described yesterday? Didn’t you say it was a weapon that could slay even gods?”

“The hero said that the real culprit was unreachable and therefore could not be defeated.”

“I see. So it ended up getting sealed here instead.”

Graziella seemed convinced, and after taking another glance at the book, stepped back towards Reiji and the others. Certainly, if it was such a dangerous object, anybody would want to rid the world of it. But because they couldn’t do that, it had to be sealed away. With that settled, Faylia pointed out another pedestal.

“And over here... This what you have been seeking.”

Placed atop a metal pedestal was a small box. Seemingly unaffected by the malicious aura of the book, its pedestal was pristine. There wasn’t a single sign of any deterioration. Approaching it, Faylia quietly picked up the box and presented it to Reiji and the others.

Just as Elliot had said, inside the box was an ornament. It resembled a brooch with a feather motif. It had a silvery metallic luster to it, but what stood out the most was the blue gem placed right in its center.

“So this is the Sacrament... It’s beautiful...” said Mizuki.

“That blue gem looks like a lapis lazuli,” commented Titania.

The mysterious blue sparkle of it entranced all the women present... Or so Reiji had thought.

“...What? Is there something on my face?” asked Graziella when she saw Reiji staring at her.

“Ah, no. I was just thinking about how pretty it was. Don’t you think so too, Graziella?”

“Hmph. All I’m interested in is whether or not it can be used.”

It seemed the third imperial princess of the Empire hadn’t much interest in fineries. Despite the fact that it looked like an exquisite piece of jewelry, she’d hardly given it a second look. Thinking

about it, Reiji realized she was dressed rather ruggedly. She probably didn't care much for fashion in the first place, preferring function over form.

"Is this all?" Graziella asked, turning to Faylia.

"Yes. This is all that was left behind."

"If there was something else that looked useful, I was hoping to take it too."

Graziella frankly stated her intentions, but Faylia shook her head.

"The items the heroes used were all beyond our capabilities and comprehension. Even if they had left them behind, we would have been unable to put them to any use."

"Is that so?"

"On top of the magic they used being different from ours, they used very high level techniques. The technique to use the Sacrament seemed the most advanced of them all, but it was the only relic that seemed like it might ever be usable to us."

After hearing her story, Reiji had an important question.

"So, Faylia-san, how do we use this... as a weapon?"

"I also do not really know, but when the hero changed it from an ornament to a weapon, he held it in his hand and recited something. It was likely an incantation to awaken the Sacrament, but..."

"Do you know it?"

"My apologies," said Faylia, bowing deeply.

"Did you not hear it?" asked Titania.

"I did hear it, but I could not decipher it. They seemed to be words only the user could understand."

"Doesn't that mean no one else can use the Sacrament, then?"

"I was told that someone worthy of wielding it would know. Why don't you just try holding it to start with?"

With that, Faylia picked up the Sacrament and walked over to Reiji. If he was worthy, he would know. In other words, the weapon would choose him. Whether the weapon had a will of its own or whether it could only be used by wielders who met certain conditions, Reiji didn't know. But as Faylia suggested, he would have to take it in his hands to find out for himself. As he stepped forward to receive it from Faylia, Mizuki suddenly spoke up.

"Reiji-kun!"

"What's up?"

"I was hoping that, you know... I could give it a try first."

"Wha... WHAT?!"

"Is that a no?"

"Uh... Well, I don't really mind, but..."

Though he said that, he was actually reluctant to do so considering Mizuki's previous criminal record. In other words, her chuunibyou phase. But when she got his permission, Mizuki shouted for joy. Graziella approached Reiji as he smiled bitterly.

"Is this alright?"

"Well, if I don't let her, she'll just pout."

"And what if she's granted ownership?"

"Then... we'll just need her to try her best, right?"

"Heh, you came here seeking power. If that power becomes Mizuki's, it'll be quite an embarrassment for you."

"You sound like you're way too amused at that prospect."

"It will make for a funny story."

Graziella was smiling, but Titania had a grave expression on her face as she walked over.

"Your Imperial Highness, do you intend to make a laughingstock of Reiji-sama?"

"What a scary face, Your Royal Highness. It's because you make faces like that that Reiji is frightened of you, no?"

"What?! Reiji-sama does not find me frightening!"

"Yeah, I never said that..."

Titania then realized that she was being taken for a ride by Graziella.

"Your Imperial Highness!"

"Hey, you guys! Don't forget about me! I'm about to awaken a legendary weapon here! Watch!"

After stamping her foot because nobody was paying attention to her, Mizuki did a complete one-eighty. She began laughing creepily like she was a villain about to lay her hands on a treasure that would help her conquer the world. It was rather foreboding, but Faylia watched over her with a warm smile. She looked like a doting mother watching a child play hero. And then, as Mizuki took the Sacrament from Faylia...

"Heh heh heh! Oh Sacrament, heed my call!" she shouted, lifting it up to the sky. "Recognize me! Me, and me alone! Hnnnnngh! Hnnnnngh!"

Even as she held it aloft and implored the relic to respond to

her, the Sacrament did nothing. And so the potential disaster of Mizuki regressing back to her chuunibyou days was averted. She looked mortified. Her cheeks puffed out and on the verge of tears, she huddled up into a nook next to the pedestal.

“Now it’s Reiji-sama’s turn.”

“Right.”

Urged on by Titania, Reiji retrieved the Sacrament from Mizuki. It was about the size of his palm. Since it was made of metal, it was somewhat cold to the touch. But as he held it in his hand, he could sense some sort of power from it. It was a mysterious pulsation—not quite heat and not quite the sensation of mana.

Just looking at it, I can feel its power swelling..

This object in his hand was sparkling with a brilliant radiance—the light of hope. No matter how far into the depths of despair they were, this would give those who looked upon it the power to live another day. It was the beautiful blue light that showed the way to tomorrow. Now, Reiji would summon its power and make it his own. And then, with that power, he would defeat the demons and restore peace to this world.

But the words needed to make that happen didn’t come to him. Maybe if he opened his mouth... Trusting in that hunch, Reiji lifted up the Sacrament and opened his mouth. And just as he did...

Suddenly, directly behind them at the entrance to the grotto, there was a loud booming that shook the entire cave. Reacting to the shock and the sound, everyone present turned to look. All they could see for now was a floating cloud of dust rolling towards them.

To protect themselves, everyone covered their mouths and squinted their eyes. But before the cloud completely obscured their vision, it split in two and revealed an outstretched hand. Before long, a whole man emerged.

The tall figure swiped his hand side to side as if he found the cloud of dust annoying. He had a slender face and crimson lips. There was an exquisite beauty to him. He might be mistaken for a woman at a glance, but his bare chest confirmed his manhood. He had coppery rusted chains wrapped around his arms, legs, and torso. At the tips of his slim fingers, he had long nails like animal claws. He had fair, white hair much like Faylia, but unlike an elf, his ears were rounded. To top it all off, his eyes were a bloody red, which gave him an indescribable, eerie aura.

He turned those haunting eyes on Reiji and the others in an

unfeeling glare. He looked cold, like he barely saw them as living creatures. There was no compassion in those red eyes. Confronted with them, like his body was bound by the tension, Reiji was unable to move. But that seemed to be the going rate. Everyone else stared at this man in surprise, frozen on the spot. As he looked at them all one by one, Faylia was the first to speak up.

“There should have been a strict order for nobody else to be allowed through here...”

“There was. That’s why I had to force my way in like this.”

“F-Force your way in...?”

“It’s exactly as it sounds.”

“Who are you, bastard?”

At Graziella’s sudden question, the man abruptly began laughing. He was smiling like he’d heard something funny, but the scorn in his voice was undeniable.

“Is something amusing?”

“You would ask my name, offering? A mere meal dares ask my name?”

“M-Meal?”

“That’s right. Every single one of you damn humans is. From the elderly to wee babes, you’re nothing but free-range pigs. Offerings,” the man declared this audaciously in an arrogant tone.

This was the kind of nonsense Reiji would ordinarily just laugh off, but it felt like all too real of a threat right now. This man must be a demon. But for some reason, Reiji couldn’t sense the power that all demons held coming from him. No matter how Reiji looked at him, he seemed to be human. That is, apart from the red light in his eyes and the way he spoke about humans. Just as Reiji was doubting this man’s identity...

“My name is Ilzarl. I am one of the demon generals who assists Demon Lord Nakshatra.”

When those words reached their ears, everyone jumped backwards like they were physically repelled. Even Mizuki, who didn’t have the instincts of a fighter, had fallen back. They really had been repelled. The cause was the overpowering fighting spirit that Ilzarl unleashed. But something was strange. This man still didn’t look like any of them would expect a demon general to. Perhaps because she was unable to believe his claim, Faylia began muttering in a search for answers.

“A-A demon general...? No, more importantly, why are you

here...?”

But no one would answer her. Her fearful voice was the only sound in the room. Graziella then looked like she'd recalled something important.

“Wait! Bastard, what happened to those who were guarding the temple?”

“Aah, they're laid out on the ground here and there. I ate a few of them, but since I only dealt with most of them haphazardly, there might just be a few who are still alive.”

“What?!”

“You... ate them?”

Both Titania and Graziella raised startled voices at Ilzarl's shocking claim. Seeing their expressions, Ilzarl looked at them like he was having a hard time understanding their reactions.

“What is there to be surprised about? Did I not just tell you that you're all meals?”

“So you're a demon who eats people?”

“That's right. Strictly speaking, I'm not a demon... But that is inconsequential to offerings like you. More importantly, a relic known as the Sacrament should be here. Where is it?”

Ilzarl's eyes were sharp. As if being commanded by his gaze, Reiji looked down at his hands. And when he caught himself doing so, it was too late. Ilzarl realized what Reiji was holding.

“So that's it? I heard it was a weapon... Was it just a misunderstanding? Well, so be it. Hand the Sacrament over to me.”

“No. I won't let you have it.”

With those words, Reiji pulled out his orichalcum blade and stepped forward.

“You would stand against me, offering?” Ilzarl asked, looking down his nose.

“I am a hero. My name is Reiji,” he boldly declared, taking another step forward.

“Oh, so you're one of the damned heroes, are you? Now that you mention it, I can feel some of the Goddess's power from you.”

Reiji was surprised that he could sense such a thing. But it was what Ilzarl said next that truly shook him.

“However, in that state, you are still far too plain for my tastes. As a meal, you're underripe,” he muttered.

Shivers ran down Reiji's spine—it was the natural fear of predators that all living beings instinctually possessed. Even though

this man appeared human himself, he really was looking at Reiji and the others like they were nothing but food. Rajas had been strong, certainly, and Reiji had felt fear when he faced him too... but this was completely different.

Reiji was reminded of monsters he saw in storybooks as a child. Such illustrations were often comical in many ways, but for some reason, there had always been one thing that struck genuine fear into his heart—the monsters that ate people. And that fear was surfacing now. Even though he was facing a man, his prey instincts were screaming. While Reiji was seized in place as he trembled lightly, Titania began to move.

“Reiji-sama, I will support you!”

“I got it... Mizuki, fall back as far as you can! This demon is dangerous!”

“O-Okay!”

After confirming that Mizuki had fallen back, Reiji stared down Ilzarl’s intimidating aura. He could then hear a beautiful voice chanting behind him.

“Oh Wood. Admonish and pressure my enemy. Serpent born from the great forest, obey my will and senselessly obliterate the strong. Solid Snake Constriction.”

Suddenly, the ground around Ilzarl’s feet swelled up. Tree trunks like thick, twisting vines of ivy burst from the earth and spread out. It looked like magic of the wood attribute. The thick vines wriggled about like snakes as they entangled Ilzarl’s arms, feet, and torso. It was quite a powerful spell.

The vines continued to grow. Not only were they entangling their target, they seemed intent on crushing him. To shake off so many of them would be difficult. And eventually, the thick, woody vines tangled together to form what looked like one solid, massive tree trunk. Ilzarl was nowhere to be seen in it. And as for the caster of the spell...

“Faylia-san?!”

“I will fight too. I will provide support, so while you have the chance—”

“If *that* is what you call support, your assistance can’t even be compared to shit. Did you really think mere plants would do anything to me?”

That exasperated mumble hung in the air. The person who said it should have been entombed within the giant tree... but not a

moment after Ilzarl spoke, a clap of thunder ripped through the cave as a flash of red lightning burst forth from inside of the tree, tearing it apart. From its remains, Ilzarl stepped forward while leisurely rubbing his neck. It did indeed look like Faylia's powerful spell had done nothing to him at all.

"Wha—?"

"It had no effect..."

Faylia's surprised gasp and Reiji's panicked voice overlapped. Ilzarl, meanwhile, was standing there after being released from the spell, wearing a tired expression like he was being forced to do a job he found to be rather tedious.

"I'll start with you."

"What...?"

As Ilzarl's piercing gaze fell on Faylia, he swung the thick copper chain that was wrapped around his torso. It whipped through the air with ease, as if immune to its own mass and the laws of physics, and flew at Faylia together with a red bolt of lightning.

"Oh wood. Clad yourself in sprouting power and become my shield! Little Forest Bunker!"

Right in front of Faylia, multiple trees sprouted like pillars and shot diagonally upward. Not only were they thick and heavy, but they were densely packed with mana. It made them far stronger than they appeared to the naked eye. And inclined at a forward angle, they were exceptional when it came to defending against frontal attacks. Or at least, they were supposed to be.

"As I already said, mere plants will do nothing."

The chain entwined with red lightning smashed through the line of trees like a fence made of toothpicks. It flew forward past the wreckage, wrapping around Faylia and binding her completely. It all happened in the blink of an eye. She didn't even have any time to react. And once she was entangled in the chain, Ilzarl jerked it back, easily lifting Faylia up into the air as he swung her around, scrubbing the stone walls with her before finally flinging her aside. Faylia bounced off the wall so hard that she came flying back towards Reiji and the others like a rubber ball.

"Faylia-san, no way..."

"F-Faylia-san!"

Mizuki quickly rushed over to her side and began casting restoration magic on her. Ilzarl, however, was doing nothing. It was

like he was waiting for them to bite back at him. There was no reason to ask why. There was enough of a gap between their abilities that Ilzarl could easily attack anytime he wanted to. There was not a shadow of doubt in his mind about his victory.

He simply stood there, as composed as ever. Next, it was Reiji who stepped forward. Shuffling his feet a little at a time, he slowly closed the distance between them. But even then, Ilzarl didn't appear engaged in the slightest. After shuffling all the way into striking range, Reiji unleashed a swift downward slash like a lightning strike. He was aiming for Ilzarl's shoulder, but...

"How light."

"Wha?!"

Unfazed, Ilzarl raised his left arm and used it like a shield to bring Reiji's orichalcum blade to a complete stop. And despite taking the strike to his bare, unprotected arm, he wasn't even bleeding. Reiji hadn't held anything back. He'd struck with all of his might, but it hadn't so much as penetrated skin. Even Rajas had had to cloak himself in his dark demonic power to repel Reiji's blade. Yet Ilzarl had done it with nothing but a sneer.

Witnessing this unprecedented event with his own two eyes, Reiji was frozen in place for a moment in shock. And in that moment, Ilzarl's right hand reached out and loomed over Reiji. No, more precisely, his nails did. Those talons that looked sharp enough to be used as blades then swooped down on Reiji, and he promptly held up his orichalcum sword.

"G-Guh...!"

Ilzarl's nails came to a stop a hair's breadth from Reiji. Reiji had caught Ilzarl's hand with his blade, but when he did, a terrifying shockwave of power blew right through and past him, kicking up a cloud of dust like a squall in its wake. If it weren't for the divine protection from the hero summoning, he would have been blown up against the wall by it—fatally so.

"So you *can* react. Despite being so weak, you put up such a futile struggle..."

"N-Not yet..."

Ilzarl took advantage of his height and pushed down. His arms were unbelievably, dreadfully strong. Caught between them and the ground, Reiji's body began creaking. His bones were ominously groaning like they were about to crack. His feet began sinking into the grotto floor.

He couldn't escape. He couldn't even deflect the power of Ilzarl's arms to the side. It was just too much, and it took all his effort simply to endure it. Boiling sweat poured down Reiji's brow, far more unpleasant than any cold sweat he'd ever been in.

When he paid attention, he could sense mana swelling up behind him. It was Titania. However, perhaps because it wasn't especially powerful, Ilzarl didn't even shift his gaze. No, he kept his indifferent eyes locked on Reiji. Titania fired off her wind magic, and even though it struck Ilzarl directly, he relented nothing. Seeing her spell play out fruitlessly, Titania let out a bitter groan.

"Ugh, magic is practically useless..."

"I'll handle him. Your Royal Highness, go save Reiji."

"Tch... Understood."

After Titania acknowledged her plan, Graziella stepped forward and tried a spell of her own.

"Oh Earth. Thou art the crystallization of my tyranny. Take hold of unyielding power and smash my foe to pieces. Become a monument that shall extol a glorious death."

Graziella's dauntless chant resounded through the grotto. Before he knew it, Reiji caught sight of Titania's figure closing in. Her hands were hidden behind her back as she ran towards him.

"Tia?!"

"Reiji-sama! Summon all your strength and ward him off! Leave the rest to me!"

"S-Sure!"

Unwaveringly heeding Titania's instructions, Reiji put all his strength into pushing Ilzarl's hand to the side. The instant he did, Titania took him by the torso and pushed him out of the way. And just as Ilzarl's hand struck the ground, Graziella unleashed her keywords.

"Crystal Raid!"

The gypsum on the ground rose to the air, broke into countless splinters, and then accelerated like cannonballs as they rushed towards Ilzarl, who'd been left completely open. Since earth spells inherently had a good amount of weight behind them, they were naturally more destructive than other magics when used to make projectiles. Additionally, because the stones Graziella was firing were tapered into sharp points, they were especially damaging against living creatures. Or at least, they were supposed to be.

"Even this amount of destructive power is futile?! You damned

monster!”

The volley of pointed stones flying at Ilzarl had all struck him and fallen to the floor. As the mana vanished from them, they were rendered mere pebbles. Ilzarl stood there towering over them—completely unharmed.

“Oh Earth! Thou art the crystallization of my tyranny! Take hold of unyielding power and cut my foe to pieces like a sharpened blade! The monument that extols glorious death is a brilliant, shining sword marking the grave of my enemy! Refined Crystal Raid!”

Graziella incanted a spell slightly different from the one she’d first tried. The rocks that floated up into the air this time elongated and became thin like small swords. When Graziella swung her extended arm out to the side, they too assailed Ilzarl.

“Then how about this?!”

“Hmph! It doesn’t matter what you hurl at me, woman—it’s futile! HrrrAAAAAH!”

Just as the small stone swords threatened to pierce Ilzarl’s body, he unleashed a scream loud enough to shatter the eardrums of all who heard it. It shook the entire grotto, but more importantly, everything born of Graziella’s magic fell to the ground on the spot.

“Ridiculous! To repel magic using only his voice...”

As Graziella muttered to herself in disbelief, Ilzarl’s gaze fell upon her. Feeling his bloodthirst and fighting spirit turned on her, Graziella panicked and jumped back from where she stood.

“Ugh... This is a bad location. I can’t use Devil Connection here...” she complained bitterly.

In such a narrow space underground, her trump spell—where she teleported in a massive boulder—would be impossible to use to any effect. Ruing not being able to use all her powers, she tried to retreat to the back.

“Too slow.”

But it seemed Ilzarl had identified her as his new target—his prey. He took a grand leap far surpassing the distance of Graziella’s retreat, putting them face to face in a single breath.

“Shi—!”

“Look out!”

“Reiji-sama?!”

Witnessing Graziella’s predicament, Reiji escaped Titania’s arms and made a mad dash to save her. Seeing his companion in danger,

his body was practically moving on its own.

After stepping in with his left leg, Ilzarl let fly his right. Graziella's face in that moment was steeped in despair. Titania and Mizuki were screaming. But as Ilzarl's kick came flying in to decapitate Graziella, Reiji swung his sword out with all his might to meet it.

"RAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

It felt like he'd struck a mass of hard metal. Due to the sheer difference in strength between them, he was unable to stop Ilzarl's kick, but did manage to dampen its power somewhat. And in the heat of the moment, Reiji made a split-second decision. Having used up all of his strength, Reiji let go of his orichalcum sword and jumped at Graziella to break away.

Grabbing and holding tightly on to her, the two of them tumbled to the ground. Because he'd leaped at her with all his remaining might and did his best to cover her, the ground repeatedly scraped and knocked against his back as they rolled along. As they finally came to a stop, Graziella yelled out as she came to understand what had just happened.

"Are you an idiot?! Why did you save me?!"

"Why? 'Cause you were in danger. I just..."

"Just what?! You're a hero! What do you intend on accomplishing by covering for me?!"

Seized by the pain catching up with him, Reiji's consciousness grew hazy. He couldn't help thinking this was a somewhat unexpected reprimand from the arrogant Graziella. She sounded like she was telling him that he'd underestimated their enemy, and that, as a hero, his safety should be imperative above all else.

"Sorry."

That was the thought that came naturally to Reiji's somewhat foggy mind. And it wasn't just intended for Graziella, but also for Titania and Mizuki who continued to believe in him, as well as everyone else important to him that wasn't present. The reason he was apologizing needn't be said.

Reiji then heaved Graziella off to the side.

"You complete moron!"

"Reiji-sama!"

"Reiji-kun!"

It's fine like this...

And just as he convinced himself of that, he could feel a

terrifying presence approaching from behind.

“Saving a woman?! What a boring way to meet your end, hero!”

“Ugh...”

Reiji was going to die here. But the moment he resigned himself to that, a blue wind suddenly blew past his eyes.

“Oh?”

Just as he thought that he heard a puzzled voice come from Ilzarl, Ilzarl leaped backward. Seeing this, Reiji promptly turned around. Cutting in between him and Ilzarl was Titania, with two swords crossed at the ready.

“Huh?! Tia?! What’s with those swords...?”

“Leave that for later, Reiji-sama! For now, just fall back!”

Seeing the wisdom in her words, Reiji retreated from the battle. Before he knew it, Titania had popped the collar of her overcoat to cover the lower half of her face, and switched her swords to an underhand grip. But just as quickly as she’d done all that, Titania vanished from his field of vision. As if she’d teleported, she instantly appeared behind Ilzarl and charged in.

As Ilzarl sensed her presence and turned around, Titania vanished again without so much as attacking. She then reappeared behind his back, and this time, she truly intended to strike. Ilzarl used his chains to shield himself.

“Tch, buzzing around...” Ilzarl scoffed in an annoyed voice.

But then Titania vanished a third time.

“Amazing...” Reiji unwittingly muttered in childlike admiration.

Titania was moving around like she was toying with Ilzarl. Even with Reiji’s enhanced vision courtesy of the hero summoning, he could just barely keep up with her movements. She repelled Ilzarl’s flying copper chains with her swords, and whenever she closed in on him, she would unleash a flurry of attacks with both blades.

In response, Ilzarl took evasive action. Even though he’d simply stood in place and blocked Reiji’s attacks, it didn’t seem he had any interest in being hit by Titania’s. For every slash she threw out, he took a step back or to the side to avoid it. But Titania’s slashes were peculiar in the way they arced through the air, so dodging them required much more effort than any normal attack.

And her assault showed no sign of letting up. Spotting an opening in Ilzarl’s defenses, she went soaring in on the offensive, letting fly a cross-shaped slash with both blades before gracefully

leaping back. It certainly looked like her mithril swords had caught Ilzarl right in the face. However...

“Even though you don’t possess the divine protection of the Goddess, you put up a much better fight. Also...”

The only evidence of her grand attack was a cut on Ilzarl’s cheek. Despite standing plainly in front of his opponent, Ilzarl nonchalantly wiped away the dripping blood on his face with his finger and looked at it somewhat dubiously.

“It’s been a long time since I was dealt a wound, but to think it would be at the hands of a mere human...”

“Don’t underestimate me!”

“This is as far as you go.”

Titania howled as she broke into a dash and closed in once more. Ilzarl, meanwhile, simply waved his hand to attack. In an instant, five enormous slashes—one for each finger—assaulted the bare rock floor in front of Titania, forcing her to come to a halt. Looking closely, the ends of Ilzarl’s chains were split, making them look like anchors. They floated through air, gathering around her before plunging into the ground. She was now effectively trapped in a chain cage.

“Tia!”

“Ugh! Oh Earth! Surround me and become a firm bulwark! Absolutely none shall pass and threaten this life! Earth Wall Rising!”

Immediately following Titania’s chant, a wall of mud formed between her and the chains right as red lightning came pouring in. The mud wall flickered crimson red and jet black, repeatedly assaulted by the lightning. But it didn’t last long. It crumbled far too easily, leaving Titania completely defenseless. With the next red flash, there was a burst of white smoke and she seemed to disappear completely.

“TIAAAAAAAA!”

Entirely drowned out by the roaring thunder, Reiji screamed out for Titania as loud as he could... but there was no answer.

“N-No way...”

Reiji could hear Mizuki mutter in disbelief and despair. Every single person present shared her feelings and collectively held their breath.

The cloud of white smoke rising up from the chain cage flickered with the remnants of the red lightning. It was an attack

easily on par with the red lightning that had so easily destroyed Faylia's spell earlier. But instead of a tree this time, it was Titania's slender body that had taken the brunt of it. No one expected that she would survive it. However, as the white smoke dispersed, they could make out the silhouette of a girl on her knees.

"N-Not yet..."

"So your defenses just barely managed to keep you alive. Even so..."

Pulling his chains up from the ground, he used them to ensnare Titania and toss her aside like an annoying pest.

"Gah... ah..."

Unable to even move, she bounced helplessly along the ground as she rolled towards the pedestals where the relics were kept. She crashed right into one of them, sending the tyrant's cursed tome flying.

The book landed right at Ilzarl's feet. His eyes drawn to it, he stooped down to pick it up. Seeing this, Faylia, who was still being supported by Mizuki, immediately cried out.

"No!"

"What? What's wrong with this?"

"Y-You mustn't touch that!"

She was screaming like her own life was on the line, but it was perhaps even more serious than that. If what Faylia said was true, anyone who touched the cursed book would become just like the tyrant. If a demon general were so possessed, the outcome would be unimaginable.

"Hmph, certainly there is an ominous feeling coming from it."

"If you understand that, then..."

She was going to plead with him, beg him not to touch it. But...

"It's not like I don't have any experience with this kind of thing."

Ignoring her, Ilzarl picked up the book. However... nothing happened. Ilzarl simply scrutinized the artifact. There was none of the tragedy Faylia had so feared.

"...How? After touching that, how are you staying sane...?"

"Regarding that, it's a privilege of this form. At any rate, to think there was another power similar to Zekaraia..." Ilzarl muttered in a serious voice as he tucked the book on his back using his chains. "I will be taking this. Now then, the only ones who can still put up a fight are... the bastard hero and that woman in the

back, right?”

“Urgh...”

Ilzarl was looking at both Reiji and Mizuki, and began walking towards them. He'd dealt with Graziella and easily defeated Titania, who had put up a fierce fight. He was a monster. Beyond a shadow of doubt. And right now, Reiji didn't even have his sword. He hadn't had a chance to get it back after dropping it earlier, leaving him completely unarmed. After what he'd seen, he didn't even think his magic would have any effect. There was absolutely nothing left that he could do.

“Reiji, take Mizuki and run.”

“What...?”

“If a hero dies here, then all will be lost. I will hold this damned monster back. Now go.”

“B-But...”

As Reiji hesitated, Titania got to her feet and followed after Graziella.

“R-Reiji-sama, it is just as Her Imperial Highness says. Pay us no mind and flee for your life.”

“No way! I can't just leave everyone behind!”

“You needn't worry. Her Imperial Highness and Faylia-dono are both here with me.”

“Reiji, go and do what it is that you must,” said Graziella over her shoulder. “Or would you have him take that weapon and kill you as well? If even one of the heroes—the people's beacons of hope—falls, the demons' fervor will only grow stronger.”

“B-But...”

“You should have that resolve—if you don't want to abandon anyone else, that is. Now go. At this rate, everyone here will only die in vain.”

“...”

“In the worst case, use Her Royal Highness as a shield and flee.”

Graziella gave him a glinting grin. She was likely intending to convey her composure, but in this situation, all Reiji could see and hear was heroic martyrdom.

“Have you finished your goodbyes?”

A shadow was leisurely drawing closer. To Reiji, it looked just like the grim reaper. As he was right now, he was staring down an opponent he could never win against. Just as the princesses had said, his only choice was to run away. Even if he didn't want to,

there wouldn't be a single person who would forgive him for his selfishness if he stayed.

"Wait!"

It was in that moment of desperation that Reiji remembered something. He still had the Sacrament he'd put away before drawing his sword. The only catch was that he didn't know whether or not he could use it. There were special words needed to awaken it as a weapon, but they hadn't come to him.

"Ugh..."

Reiji gritted his teeth at his own helplessness. Graziella and Titania continued to urge him to retreat. Mizuki was looking at him worriedly. As the time to make his decision drew nearer, he could hear a whisper in his head.

"Is it really alright to run away? What do you intend to accomplish by not demonstrating your power here? What will you do if you cannot save them?"

The only thing that could be whispering to him... was the object in his hand. And so, tightly—as tightly as he could—Reiji gripped the Sacrament.

"Awaken... WAKE UUUUUUUUP!"

Reiji shouted out in a much louder voice than he thought himself capable of. Having an impossible choice thrust upon him, it was a roar that defied fate. And in response to that momentous cry... the Sacrament answered.

For an instant, the blue gem embedded in the center of the ornament shone radiantly, emitting a gentle blue wave. The next thing Reiji knew, everything around him turned black and white and fell still. Mizuki, Titania, Graziella, Faylia, and even Ilzarl. Time had come to a complete stop. As if to signify that Reiji and the Sacrament were the only exceptions, they still held their color, which looked especially vivid in the stopped, monochrome world around them.

Eventually, the blue wave returned to the gem as if it were rewinding. And before Reiji knew it, the ornament in his hand had become a blue sword that gave off a cold brilliance.

"I did it..."

It had the shape of a narrow longsword, but unlike any sword he'd ever seen in this world or his own, the tip and the edge of the blade were made of a metal that resembled white porcelain. And at the center of the blade was a grand, beautiful blue enameled design.

The grip was a stylish wrap of white and blue, and imitating a guard were two white porcelain-like wings atop intersecting circles. In the middle of those circles was a blue gem that seemed like crystallized lightning as it sparkled brightly.

The sword was so precise and pristine that no one would doubt it was a weapon from the future, but it also had the beauty and feel of an ancient work of art. Seeing it manifest, Titania and Graziella's shocked voices rang in the air.

"Reiji-sama!"

"Reiji, you..."

Reiji was also still gripped by surprise. When he turned around, he could see Mizuki's beaming face. But as he turned, he could also sense a presence flying towards him. Precisely where he had just been standing, an enormous copper chain passed by in a flash.

"Hmph. So that's why he called it a weapon. I see... That's quite the amusing object."

Ilzarl nonchalantly gave his impression, apparently unperturbed at this development. Reiji readily turned the Sacrament on the man whose attitude hadn't changed at all since he first arrived. And when he did, as if the Sacrament was responding to Reiji's will, it sucked in his mana and began moving.

The two white circles that were crossing each other diagonally began revolving in opposite directions, and the porcelain wings let out a pleasant chill along with particles of light and a vapor of mana that crawled up his arm. The sword began pulsating like an internal combustion engine, and those vibrations were passed through his hands.

Reiji was trembling, though it was uncertain whether it was because the sword itself was moving, or if it was because of his irrepressible urge to put the sword to use. A shining blue magic circle formed at his feet. As he swung the sword to the side, the air that the tip of the blade dragged through formed a blue crystal trail that broke into diamond dust.

The scattering dust froze the air and ground before Reiji, but there was no sense of intensity or urgency to its workings. Compared to the magic used by Titania, Graziella, and Faylia, it was relaxed. Reiji could barely feel any power from it, but that gentle power was tremendous.

"U-Urgh!"

The moment the crystals were about to reach Ilzarl, he must

have sensed the subtle nature of their power. He leaped back, but the tip of one of his chains didn't make it far enough away. When the crystals touched it, it froze, turned blue, and shattered. Indeed, the chain that had broken through Faylia's powerful magic was destroyed with ease.

"The crystal sword Ishar Cluster..."

The name of the sword suddenly came to Reiji's mind. Faylia had said it was something that could freeze anything in existence, but that wasn't quite right. Objects simply appeared to freeze before its sheer power.

And for some reason, Reiji could see that Ilzarl's movements had become sluggish. When the sword appeared, when it awoke, when he used its power... Even though Reiji had left himself open plenty of times, Ilzarl hadn't taken the initiative to attack him even once. Was it simply the negligence of an arrogant opponent? While Reiji was pondering this, he firmly gripped Ishar Cluster's hilt and leaped forward.

"Huh?! What?!" he immediately stammered.

Much to his surprise, rather than leaping, he nearly went rocketing through the air. It was unlike anything he'd experienced before, and he went much further than he'd anticipated. Feeling like he had lost control, he panicked in the air. Realizing crashing into something at this speed would be bad, he flailed in the air before reaching down with his left hand and spreading his braced legs wide. He tried to catch as much ground with those three points of contact as possible, and kicked up a trail of sand and dirt behind him as he gradually slid to a halt.

"I stopped..."

Facing the wall he'd nearly hit, Reiji let out a sigh of relief. But then, suddenly realizing he was wide open...

"Behind me?!"

"Huh...?"

It was Ilzarl who'd yelled out in shock, and Reiji who was left bewildered. By the time he realized what was going on, everyone was staring at him in surprise. They looked like the unthinkable had just happened. Observing this, a thought crossed Reiji's mind. He wasn't the only one who'd been surprised at his speed—but the reason everyone else's astonishment came later was because nobody had been able to react in time. Even Ilzarl was slow to respond. Adding it all up, the only explanation seemed to be that Reiji's own

senses had been accelerated.

Keeping his theory to himself, Reiji focused on Ilzarl's movements. And just as he thought, Ilzarl seemed to be moving much slower than before. Slow enough that Reiji could see openings to attack. But he saw something else in those openings—hope. All of a sudden, the absolute despair of fighting an impossibly doomed battle vanished into thin air.

He blocked the copper chain that came flying at him with Ishar Cluster. He could feel the shock of the blow, but it was nothing compared to what he'd experienced trying to stop Ilzarl's bare hand before.

“This is... the power of the sword...”

“I see... That's why that guy said it could reach even Zekaraia. To think it could elevate a mere offering to being able to put up a fight...”

Reiji could hear surprise in Ilzarl's voice, yet he kept his composure. It was true Reiji was no longer dominated by the despair of fighting an overwhelming opponent, but even so, he could still feel the dominating strength coming from Ilzarl. It told him that he had to fully unleash the power of the sword. As such, he stabbed the tip of Ishar Cluster into the ground with all his might.

“HAAAAAAAAAH!”

Reiji roared, and Ishar Cluster began to radically suck in his mana. As it did, the ground began to crystallize into enormous, glacial, vitreous ores. Rather than specifically surrounding Ilzarl, they spread out through the entire grotto. Ilzarl used his chains entwined with red lightning to fend them off, but the smashed crystals only continued to spread. And eventually, even the chains that were being used to smash the crystals began to freeze. At this rate, Reiji could do it. He could take Ilzarl. And just as he was thinking that...

“Huh? Urgh, ah... Wh-What...?”

Suddenly, his vision grew shaky like he'd been struck with vertigo. Just like that, his knees gave way. He no longer had the strength in his legs to stand. And as he fell, the blueish crystal ores all shattered as one.

“Reiji-sama?!”

“My body... All my mana... was sucked up...”

“With this kind of power, it's obvious it would require a

significant amount of mana to sustain. It just means that this weapon is more than you can handle.”

Talking down to Reiji like he knew everything, Ilzarl drew closer. And once again, Reiji was left utterly powerless.



Ilzarl was closing in on the vulnerable Reiji, who had used up his mana. This time, there really was nothing he could do. Watching this all unfold right in front of her, a restlessness stirred in Mizuki.

It was exactly the same as when they’d fought Rajas. She was forced to taste the bitterness of her own helplessness. Perhaps this was even worse. Here, because she was a hindrance in battle, she’d had no choice but to fall to the back. And if this was how it was going to be, was there any meaning in her coming with Reiji? She’d promised to help him, but what could she even do? She asked herself all this, but her questions were almost immediately overwritten.

“Do you wish to fight?”

She swore she heard a voice from somewhere.

“What? Who is that?”

While supporting Faylia, who was sweating and panting in pain, Mizuki looked around for the source of the voice. It wasn’t the voice of anyone present, and she couldn’t see that anyone else had entered the room. As she sat there completely bewildered, she heard the voice again from seemingly nowhere.

“Tell me: do you wish to fight, or do you not?”

Mizuki couldn’t understand the intent behind the question, but she’d known her answer for a long time now.

“I... want to fight too. I want to be useful to everyone...”

Immediately after putting her true feelings into words without the slightest hint of pretense or falsehood, Mizuki’s consciousness slipped into darkness.



In another sudden turn of events, right as Reiji fell to his knees...

BAAAAAAAANG!

With a utterly strange and incomprehensible sound, the air

between Reiji and Ilzarl exploded.

“W-Wuh....”

“Wh-What is it this time?!”

Reiji covered his face to defend from the explosion in front of him. Ilzarl leaped back in an attempt to escape it, but the explosion chased him all the way to the grotto wall. When it began to subside, Reiji could hear something behind him...

“FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

It was a familiar voice, a loud laughter that he remembered hearing before, that rang through the cavern. Reiji suddenly had a terrible feeling and quickly turned around. Behind him, he could see Mizuki standing there, her arms crossed in a haughty pose as she continued to laugh loudly.

“M-Mizuki?!”

“H-Hey, what’s the matter all of a sudden, Mizuki?!”

Titania and Graziella both directed their confused inquiries at her. And the answer they got...

“My name is not Mizuki!”

Hearing that nonsensical declaration, question marks were floating over everyone’s heads. If she wasn’t Mizuki, then who was she? Their puzzled gazes all seemed to be asking the same thing.

“Every single one of you! You shall do well to listen carefully! I am the ultimate ruler who controls everything in all three thousand worlds, the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami!”

In answer to her bold declaration, Reiji shrieked.

“WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?!”

Indeed, Reiji had entirely forgotten that he was sitting on the ground exhausted of mana. He let out a tremendous wail at the top of his lungs. To him, the least likely scenario conceivable had just unfolded. It was too much to take silently. Seeing him completely lose his composure, Titania called out to him in bewilderment.

“R-Reiji-sama?”

“M-Mizuki! Mizuki, that’s... just... This isn’t the time for that!”

“What are you saying?! If not now, then when would you say is the time?! FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Just what had come over her? Totally ignoring Reiji’s pleading, she began laughing more heartily than ever. Watching this curiosity develop, Ilzarl, who had retreated back to the wall, looked almost daunted as he raised an astonished question.

“What? Did you lose your mind?”

“What a rude fellow. I assure you this exquisite mind of mine is exactly as it should be!” With that, Mizuki suddenly clutched at her left eye. “Ah, it throbs... It aches, this left eye of mine... It throbs sonorously as it furiously demands I obliterate the scoundrel who has wronged me...”

Looking closely, one of Mizuki’s eyes was shining with a golden glow. Even though both her eyes had always been the same color before, Reiji could see for himself that they had become heterochromatic—just like she always wanted.

“Hear me, half-naked man! I shall now grant you a fate beyond this plane, dropping you into the eternal glacier known as the depths of hell, born of God’s twisted mind!”

“...”

“You should feel honored! For soon, you will be lining up before the great Demon King! FUHAHAHAHAHA!”

Mizuki thrust her finger out at Ilzarl as she unflinchingly pronounced his fate. Meanwhile, Reiji was pointing at Mizuki, his mouth gaping like a fish out of water. As for Ilzarl, as expected, Mizuki’s boasting didn’t sit well with him and he seemed to be rather irritated. He left impressions in the ground as he firmly stepped forward, exuding a strong, terrifying presence.

“To think that you would be unable to comprehend the glory of the words coming from my divine mouth! You absolute fool of woefully inadequate intellect! Take this!”

With that, a colossal amount of mana was released from Mizuki’s body.

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Both Reiji and Ilzarl were stunned—one a close friend who had been traveling with her all this time and was surprised at this irregular display of mana, and the other an enemy in absolute shock at the dreadful display of power being put on in front of him. Ilzarl rightfully put up his guard as Mizuki began chanting.

“Oh Fire and Earth. Raise your glorious, innocent hymn. My temple stands firm in this place. Become the red hot iron and the fully-blown furnace, and flood all before me. Follow my hand, Cathedral Forge!”

What Reiji heard was a composite spell unlike anything he’d ever witnessed. He’d never heard those keywords before, either. But as soon as she’d said them, multiple stone pillars shot up from the

ground beneath Mizuki. They lifted her up at their center, right up to the ceiling of the immense grotto. Just as Reiji was thinking they looked like they formed a temple, the stone pillars became red hot, seemingly heating the floor beneath them. It looked like they were melting it.

“Climb up! If you bastards waste any time, you too will be caught in the flood of this incandescent red blood of mine!”

“Huh? R-Right!”

Following Mizuki’s directions, Reiji and the others climbed up to her position. And not a moment too soon. The floor of the grotto then sank into boiling red lava, which rippled into a tsunami and rushed towards Ilzarl.

“This is bad! We won’t be able to breathe, Mizuki!”

Seeing the growing amount of surging lava, Reiji panicked. He was worried that the gas it emitted would quickly overtake the oxygen in the grotto, leaving them to suffocate. He immediately urged Mizuki to dismiss her spell, but...

“Do not fear. Even in this enclosed space, as long as you remain within this Cathedral Forge of mine, you need not worry about air. Though there seems to be an exception outside as well...”

“An exception?”

“Cast thy gaze upon that.”

Mizuki glanced over at Ilzarl. Reiji followed her line of sight. He saw what looked like an explosion of lava, and from that explosion... emerged Demon General Ilzarl.

“This destructive power is...”

While Ilzarl was muttering to himself, he looked at his own hands carefully. He’d undoubtedly been consumed by Mizuki’s lava, but perhaps through some sort of resistance, the only damage he’d suffered for it was that his skin was somewhat reddened. It was no worse than a mild sunburn.

“No way... Even after being drowned like that, he’s virtually unharmed...”

“A monster through and through...”

Reiji could hear Titania and Graziella’s terrified voices, but Mizuki was letting out a creepy laugh.

“Even against that, only his skin is slightly burned, is it? Heh heh heh, as one would expect, demi-ogre. To withstand such magic with curable wounds... It looked to me as if you shook off this magic of mine with only your mana. Such a profound black even

deeper than the darkness thrust forth by the King of Hell... You may accept my praise.”

Mizuki’s declaration as she fell deeper into the intoxication of her imagination dealt a painful blow to Reiji. But Ilzarl seemed to ignore her completely.

“It has been a long time since I’ve seen someone who could properly use magic. Reminds me of the howl of the dragonnewts...”

“Do not lump me together with beasts! I am the Holy King of the Heavens, a unique existence throughout all heaven and earth!”

Mizuki continued to rain her haughty and fearless declarations on Ilzarl, but he merely snorted before making a bored expression like his interest was quickly waning.

“You really are prattling on about nothing but incomprehensible nonsense, offering. But no matter.”

Ilzarl then turned his back on Mizuki and the others, and just like that, started to head towards the exit of the grotto. Seeing this, Mizuki looked perturbed.

“Why are you resigning? Did you not want that Sacrament or whatever it was, you bastard?”

“I can feast on offerings like you whenever I please. But if I’m going to, it would simply prefer to do so when they’ve fully matured. Until then, I will leave that Sacrament or whatever in your hands.”

“You don’t have to show such patience on my account, you know. Or perhaps you fear this power of mine?”

“M-Mizuki...”

Mizuki continued to provoke Ilzarl, but Titania looked at her with pleading eyes to ask her to stop.

“Do not fear. Against one such as I, there is no opponent that cannot be defeated.”

Without even glancing at Titania, Mizuki remained completely focused on Ilzarl. Having regressed back into her chuunibyou state, she was powered by an incomprehensible level of self-confidence.

“You are a mere offering. Don’t speak with such conceit. I’m saying that I will let you live today. You should be cowering like the others, shivering in fear.”

“Hmph!”

Ilzarl shot a gaze at her that looked like it could kill someone, yet Mizuki simply scoffed. Ilzarl then narrowed his eyes and muttered something.

“Just doing what that guy says... Now that I think about it, that would peeve me too.”

Nobody could hear what he said, but Reiji could somehow sense discontent in his expression.

But then, just like that, the demon who handily overwhelmed the hero and his companions vanished. Reiji and the others were struck with relief as he left, and at long last, the tension left their stiff bodies.

“W-We’re alive...”

Reiji’s hands couldn’t stop shaking. Titania and the others also seemed to be completely spent, and all slackly slumped their shoulders as they stared at the entrance to the grotto dumbfounded.

“Seriously, to think he just up and left...”

“Just what did that demon want?”

Ilzarl had only showed up, laid waste to the group, and left. He seemed to want the Sacrament at first, but it apparently wasn’t a very high priority. In the end, he’d left without it and didn’t seem too upset about it. But while going over what had just happened in his head, Reiji was stuck with a concern that seemed far more immediate.

“That’s right! Mizuki!”

“What is the matter, my beloved fiancé? Suddenly raising thy voice like that...”

“Y-Y-Your—?!”

Reiji was too stunned by her shocking declaration to say anything else. Seeing that he was magnificently bewildered, Mizuki cocked her head to the side.

“What? Is something strange?”

“S-Strange?! Yes, very strange! What’s going on with you, seriously?!”

“There is nothing at all going on. On the contrary, just why are you so bothered?”

Mizuki was broadly grinning like she was having fun toying with him, but Reiji was too worked up to tell what she was thinking at all. In the midst of their antics, Titania called out to him.

“Reiji-sama, more importantly, shall we get out of here? There’s the matter with Mizuki, but I am also worried about Faylia-dono’s condition, not to mention Gregory and the others...”

“Ah, yeah... You’re right...”

Titania’s suggestion was the most reasonable thing anyone had

said so far. And so, carrying an anxiety that could not adequately be summed up in simple words, Reiji lent his shoulder to Faylia and left the grotto with the others.



As for what had happened outside, the knights of Astel and the soldiers Graziella brought with her from Nelferia were injured, but not gravely. They'd all escaped without life-threatening wounds.

From what they told Reiji, after they saw him and the others off, Ilzarl arrived at the temple. At first they thought he was just some shady figure and the monks from the Church of Salvation tried to turn him away, but Ilzarl didn't hesitate to tear into the monks when they opposed him. From there, battle broke out. The spellcasters from the church weren't able to contain him, and every last one of them that tried was apparently eaten.

But, perhaps because he'd already eaten his fill, by the time Ilzarl reached Gregory and the others, he seemed to have lost interest and didn't even put much effort into fighting. If there was something to be thankful for, it was just that.

Presently, the survivors had all been treated with restoration magic and were resting in a recovery room with Faylia. Reiji and the others were gathered together in a separate room they were borrowing from the temple. Recalling the fight with Ilzarl, Titania let out a heavy sigh.

"He certainly was a preposterous opponent."

"Demon General Ilzarl... So that's the kind of enemy we'll be up against from here on out, huh?"

Reiji could only offer a weak reply. There were a meager three things that he could appreciate with certainty right now. That Ilzarl had been a terrifyingly formidable enemy. That he'd been powerless against him. And that he'd been extravagantly foolish in declaring that he would fight despite such powerlessness.

The fact that they'd be up against truly strong enemies had first been impressed upon Reiji back during their fight against Rajas. Naturally, considering the nature of his mission, it was something he'd prepared himself for. But for them to be so overwhelming... For an opponent to show up that he'd literally been unable to even harm on his own...

Reiji had awoken the Sacrament at some point during the

battle, but the sword had reverted back to its form as an ornament. Even when he tried calling out to it now to transform, it wouldn't answer. If they ran into another demon general as things were, he would again be useless.

Was that... Was this really okay? Such questions filled his heart with doubt, but he wasn't the only one gripped by anxiety. Both Titania and Graziella felt the same way. Recalling their respective fights with Ilzarl depressed them, and their usual energy was nowhere to be seen.

Ilzarl and the Sacrament were both important matters, but Reiji would be forced to set them aside for the moment.

"My, my, whatever is the matter? My dear fiancé for whom my desire burns hotter than a fiery dragon's heart as it slumbers at the core of the earth, and whose existence is more precious to me than all the angels who call me master... For some time now, your complexion has been rather poor, you know?"

"Whose fault is that...?"

"Are you implying that the fault is mine? How rude... Well then, I shall let it be."

Mizuki's speech and conduct were one thing, but that wasn't all that seemed different about her. Her very attitude as "Io Kuzami" had changed, conjuring some very unpleasant memories for Reiji. Ever since they'd left the grotto, she'd stood with her arms haughtily crossed, overflowing with confidence. But what stood out the most were unmatching eyes. Indeed, her left eye was no longer black, but gave off a unique golden glow.

Reiji looked over at her with a complex expression. Titania and Graziella, equally unable to hide their bafflement, also beheld her with a certain degree of confusion.

"How do I put this...? Mizuki, isn't it about time you put an end to this act? Do we have to relive your dark past?"

"I am not Mizuki. I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami."

"That's what I'm talking about. I got tired of hearing that a long time ago... Ugh, we're not getting anywhere like this..."

Mizuki... No, Io Kuzami was unabashedly telling Reiji exactly what he didn't want to hear. At his wits' end, he felt a strong headache coming on. However, Io Kuzami seemed completely unaware of all this.

"There is no act. Everything is exactly as I say. I am the

supreme ruler who oversees all children born under the heavens. Indeed, I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami.”

“Every time you open your mouth, the act just gets grander and grander... Hahh, as I thought, you’ve completely regressed into your dark days...” Reiji let out an anguished groan, then looked back over at her. “Hey, Mizuki...”

“How often must I repeat myself? I am not Mizuki.”

Io Kuzami once more asserted her identity, but this time Titania called out to her.

“Um, pardon... But are you really not Mizuki?”

“Indeed, I am genuinely not the true proprietor of this body—this girl known as Mizuki. I am the holy one descended from the heavens that hears the wishes of all who live in this world.”

What’s genuine about it? Much less holy?

Reiji grumbled to himself in his own mind, but couldn’t actually bring himself to say anything as he winced at her words. It was then that Graziella turned a question to him with a curious expression on her face.

“Reiji, I don’t really understand what’s going on with this Io Kuzami... Could you explain it?”

“...Do I have to?”

“Whatever the situation, it seems we’re stuck with it for the time being, no?”

“How do I put this...? It’s embarrassing to talk about...”

“Why are you embarrassed about it?”

“You know... It’s like when you’re sitting happily together with your family watching TV, and all of a sudden something very adult comes on...”

“I do not understand these expressions from your foreign world.”

“I can’t think of any other good examples...”

As Reiji hesitated to explain, Io Kuzami proudly puffed out her chest and spoke for herself in her typical self-assured tone.

“So be it! If you wish to know about me, I shall inform you. Everyone other than my fiancé should humbly bow down and listen.”

“Who’s going to bow? Just talk.”

“Man, she’s really going to say it... You’re really going to just confess, huh, Mizuki?”

As Reiji started muttering in despair, Io Kuzami took a daunting

pose atop one of the beds. The other three people present resisted asking whether that was really necessary. But only after Io Kuzami finished lording over them with her gaze did she get to her explanation.

“I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami. I have awakened to guide the worthless beings collectively known as humanity who have run rampant in this boring world to the true realm of darkness. I am the absolute ruler of the black flame darker than the abyss that grants death without partiality to all in existence. My other names are the Grand Ripper, the Death Child... Right?”

“Don’t ask me! I don’t know!”

“I am certain I had about three other names granted to me, though... I am the one who boils all the malice in the world into an even jet black darkness using that Pandora whose name is karma to...”

“You don’t have to say it! You don’t have to say any more! Please!”

Reiji covered his ears. Perhaps some of his anguish had transferred over to Titania, who was now rubbing her temple with a severe expression.

“I do not understand why, but just listening to her gives me a headache...”

“It’s partly because what she says is incomprehensible, Tia...”

The two of them genuinely appeared to be suffering. Graziella, meanwhile, seemed to be considering the issue rather seriously.

“Reiji, Your Royal Highness... Could it be that Mizuki was possessed by something strange? Didn’t the elf mention something similar earlier? That the reason the king who ruled over this region turned villainous was because he was possessed by a force that drove him to madness and tyranny?”

“Now that you mention it...”

“Could you not lump me together with your kind?”

Io Kuzami was indignant at the comparison, but the more Reiji thought about it, the more he began to think she was right—if he lumped them together, he would feel badly for the tyrant.

“I shall say this beforehand, but I did not so much as touch that book. As another matter entirely, that fiend who serves he who holds the fist that conquered the devil, he who shook the heavens and earth from top to bottom and spread his name across the

universe, eager for atrocities greater than the ones wrought by God and Satan—the god of demons—did he not take it with him?”

Io Kuzami was probably referring to Ilzarl. Certainly, Faylia had said that the origin of the tyrant’s possession was the book. But if the same force had possessed Mizuki, would it really be dredging up her dark past? As Reiji wrinkled his brow wondering just what was going on, Titania drew closer to him to whisper in his ear.

“Reiji-sama, what do you think?”

“Maybe—and I mean *maybe*—somewhere inside of Mizuki, she’s actually got another personality or something?”

“Another personality?”

“Yeah, it’s a condition called multiple personality disorder. When people undergo tremendous stress, sometimes they’re unable to keep their mind in balance, and other personalities are born to help cope.”

Reiji gave Titania a simple explanation of a single cause of multiple personality disorder. Graziella, who happened to overhear this, cut in on their conversation.

“So that is the situation with Mizuki right now? I see... Certainly, that demon unleashed a tremendous fighting spirit. It isn’t strange to think that it would have done her in mentally.”

“Is there a way to turn her back, Reiji-sama?”

“It’s not like I’m a doctor, so I don’t know... But I’ve heard that people with such disorders sometimes switch personalities, or when they’re relieved of their stress, the new personality integrates with the original one. We might be able to find a way to rectify this with enough time.”

“So this doesn’t mean that the real Mizuki just vanished?”

“Theoretically...”

Titania felt a slight sense of relief upon hearing this. But the next to cut in on their conversation was Io Kuzami herself.

“Talking in secret amongst yourselves? Include me as well. Allow the King of the Heavens to hear your foolish conjecture that amounts to no more than grains of rice—no, specks of dust.”

“No. If we include you right now, Mizuki, we won’t get anywhere.”

“Mizuki, do not worry. Until you return to normal, I will help you to the best of my ability.”

“So you would ignore me, Io Kuzami? Nothing but insolence...” She made her dissatisfaction known with a snort, but after doing so,

returned to a fearless smile. “More importantly, my dear fiancé, do you not have more to worry about than me to the exclusion of all else?”

“Huh?”

“That.”

Io Kuzami was pointing at the pocket of Reiji’s blazer. Inside of it were the Sacrament and the device called the Lachesis Meter, which he’d received from Faylia. Wondering what she was trying to say, Reiji reached into his pocket, and...

Tick.

“Huh?”

He heard the unmistakable sound of a clock ticking inside of his head. Perhaps saying he “heard” it wasn’t the right way to describe it. It was as if the sound resounded directly within his ears.

“Reiji-sama?”

“Did you... hear that just now?”

“Hear what?”

Titania looked quite puzzled, unsure of what he was talking about. She apparently hadn’t heard the ticking herself. After a short pause to try and listen for something, she questioned Reiji again.

“Reiji-sama, did you hear something?”

“We didn’t hear anything,” volunteered Graziella.

She vigilantly scanned the area to try and determine the source of the sound, but it seemed—whatever it was—that it had only been heard by Reiji. Meanwhile, Io Kuzami was grinning widely like she had before when she was toying with him. Her grin unchanged, she nodded towards what Reiji was holding in his hand. Reiji opened the face of the pocket watch. Just like when he first picked it up, there lay a curved hour and minute hand inside, but this time...

“It’s moving...”

It was certainly different. The curved needles were now moving, if only ever so slightly, and only roughly every minute or so.

“What a sinful measuring device. Its very existence suggests that everyone is doomed to perish, but for it to have been made, it also suggests there is a way to rebel against that fate.”

“Mizu— No, Io Kuzami-san, what is this to you?”

“It is a scale to measure the coming apocalypse. It’s a magic device that represents the rivalry between the inevitable future and the resistance of the present day.”

“Faylia-dono did say something like that, didn’t she? Something about the beginning of the end of the world, right?”

“In other words, you just repeated what she said in an exaggerated expression?”

“I cannot deny the exaggerated expression... Well, take it however you like. You will only ever have the leisure to do so now, after all. FUHAHAHAHAHA!”

As Reiji looked at the Lachesis Meter with a stern expression, Io Kuzami broke into laughter. Her laughter gradually grew louder and louder, rattling Reiji’s mind and keeping him from thinking. Unable to bear it any longer, he screamed at Io Kuzami.

“Can you be a little quieter, Mizuki?!”

“Will you remember my name properly already? I am the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami! I am absolutely not Mizuki! Absolutely not!”

“AAAAAH! DAMN IT, DAMN IT, DAMN IT! Why did it end up like this?! How?! SUIMEI, SAVE MEEEEEEEEEE!”

Io Kuzami’s loud laughter and Reiji’s wails of despair echoed throughout the temple. This all happened that evening, one week after Suimei fought Eanru.

Chapter 3: The New Enemies

The battle in the northern part of the Alliance came to an end when the demons, at least temporarily, retreated. The various countries of the Alliance each suffered considerable casualties in the fighting, and so the human forces also temporarily pulled back to reorganize themselves. So, in the end, the overall result of the battle was concluded to be a draw.

Upon hearing that the demons had ultimately been—rather unexpectedly—targeting Hatsumi specifically, the king of Miazen requested Hatsumi and her party return to the capital. Waiting for their arrival, he gave a royal order for the city's defenses to be shored up. It was a kind gesture, but likely a futile one. When it came to an opponent that could overwhelm both Suimei and Hatsumi, no amount of soldiers would be able to make a difference. But nevertheless, it was about the only defensive plan the castle could realistically put in place. And so soldiers were gathered from all over Miazen, and patrols were put on around the clock duty all over the city, arguably to the point of overdoing it.

As far as the inside of the castle was concerned, the royal guard was hard at work as well. They remained wary of Suimei, but under the present circumstances, doing anything about him was out of the question. As such, they largely looked the other way and ignored him completely.

A few days after Suimei and the others departed from the north, it was decided that there would be a break in the fighting with the demons. As such, Hatsumi returned from the battlefield as well. Now back in the capital, she was visiting a certain place on her own.

That place was the boarding house of Twilight Pavilion, where Suimei and the others were staying. Hatsumi went up the wide staircase that was installed in the entrance hall, and, following the leather-covered handrail, headed towards the guest rooms. Before long, she arrived at her destination, and knocked on one wooden door in particular.

“Um, may I come in?”

Announcing herself only after making it through the foyer and to the second floor of the building felt a bit odd, but since she was here to visit someone in particular, Hatsumi thought it was the polite thing to do. After a moment, Hatsumi heard a female voice and footsteps approaching from the other side.

“Coming! Oh, it’s you, Hero-dono of the Alliance!”

“Yes. Um, if I remember correctly, it’s Stingray-san... right?”

“Indeed. It has been... Well, not all that long, no?”

The one to answer the door was Felmenia Stingray. She spoke fondly as she recalled their last encounter, and Hatsumi replied with a calm smile. Felmenia then made a dignified expression and, in the utmost demonstration of her proper manners and decorum, put her hand to her chest and bowed.

“Greetings, Hero-dono. You are most welcome in these humble lodgings.”

“Er, ah, yes, thank you... It’s lovely to be here.”

Hatsumi hesitated just a little at her sudden change in attitude, but Felmenia’s formal demeanor quickly crumbled as her friendly tone and smile returned.

“Incidentally, could it be that you are by yourself? Without so much as an escort?”

“That’s right. I snuck out on my own. If anyone came along, that would be a little troublesome.”

Hatsumi spoke with a bitter smile on her face. It may have been somewhat rude, but she must have been exhausted. No one from the palace thought well of her going to visit Suimei. She’d tried to come see him multiple times since getting back into town, but the king and his cabinet ministers seemed to have passed down orders to the guards to keep the hero within the palace walls for her own safety after what had transpired. So her only choice was to find a chance and sneak out. It was somewhat ironic, but she truly thought that this was actually the safest place to be right now.

“Well, there’s certainly no reason for us to stand here and talk. Please do come in.”

Felmenia stepped back and opened the door fully, holding it against herself to make room for Hatsumi to enter.

“Thank you. It seems I’ll finally be able to relax. The palace and even the streets are all nothing but guards, guards, guards. Just where did they all come out from...?”

"That is just how dire the times are. And so, Hero-dono, what brings you here today?"

"I thought I'd drop by to give my thanks for coming to save me the other day. The guild master said that Suimei would probably be here around this time."

"Is that so? Suimei-dono should currently be in his room sorting through some documents. If you wait a bit, I do think that he should be here before long."

"Thank you, I think I'll do just that."

Guided by Felmenia, Hatsumi took a seat inside. It seemed Felmenia was getting ready for a gathering of some sort, as she already had some local tea prepared. She offered Hatsumi some, and as she took a sip, she could hear the sound of the door opening again.

"Oh, Lady Hatsumi is here?"

The next to appear was Lefille, who looked a bit surprised to spy an unexpected visitor. Hatsumi stood up from her seat to greet her.

"Good day. Your name is Lefille, right?"

"That's right."

After Lefille nodded with a bright expression, Felmenia explained the circumstances of Hatsumi's visit to her.

"It seems the hero has come to express her thanks for the other day."

"That's quite courteous of you. Sorry for making you come out all this way."

"Not at all. I know I said it last time, but allow me to thank you again for the assistance and reinforcements. Thanks to you, we were able to return safely."

In accordance with standard Japanese etiquette, Hatsumi bowed to show her gratitude. Taking the gesture to be excessive, Felmenia started waving her hands as if to say she was exaggerating.

"It was nothing. All we did was lend a hand to Suimei-dono. If there's anyone to be thanked, it's him."

"It's true. If Suimei-kun hadn't said he would go, those reinforcements probably wouldn't have shown up, after all. The credit should all go to him, so please don't pay us any mind."

Both girls were speaking modestly. Hatsumi could feel something of a wall between them. Perhaps it was only natural

since this was only really the second time they'd ever met, but it seemed like they were being vigilant about something else.

Hatsumi continued sipping her tea as she turned such thoughts over in her head. Waiting for Lefille to take her seat, Felmenia finally broke the ice in a somewhat timid manner.

"Um... Hero-dono, might I ask you something?"

"Yes? What about?"

"It is about Suimei-dono... Um, what is your relationship with him?"

"It seems we're cousins. Did you not hear about it from Yakagi himself?"

"That is... Certainly, we had inquired about it, but..."

"Is something wrong?"

"Ah, no..."

Felmenia awkwardly looked away. It seemed this was something difficult for her to ask. Hatsumi couldn't tell whether her roundabout manner of asking was supposed to make her realize or say something, but as she curiously contemplated the matter, Lefille spoke up.

"You can't beat around the bush like that, Lady Felmenia. Lady Hatsumi, I'd like to be frank and cut to the point. What do you think about Suimei-kun?"

"Wh-What? As in...?"

Hatsumi twitched like someone had just pricked her finger. Being asked what she thought about him, she could only assume they meant in *that* way. And then, confirming that she was right on the mark, Lefille's cheeks turned pink as she clarified her question.

"U-Um, that's, you know... That is to say... Do you love him or not... as a man?"

"H-Hero-dono, what do you think about Suimei-dono?!"

Jumping on the wagon, Felmenia leaned forward intently—nearly out of her seat—with a dire expression on her face. Both of them were quite serious, but...

"Wait a sec here! Why are you asking me that kind of thing?"

"Because this is an important matter to us!"

And with that, Hatsumi finally had an inkling about their reasons for asking in the first place. And as she realized that, Felmenia and Lefille also seemed to sense just how Hatsumi thought of Suimei. The three of them reacted near simultaneously.

"Tch."

“Hmph.”

“Grrr...”

All three girls were now glaring darkly at each other. Like rivals, or maybe even enemies.

It was then that Suimei arrived. After finishing his organizing and coming to a good stopping point in his work, he was in a good mood and entered the room while humming a song. But for some reason, sparks were flying between the three beauties in front of him.

“Uh... What’s this? What’s happening?”

The battle concerning the thickheaded magician had really only just begun.



Liliana Zandyke had recently developed a strange “cuddling habit.”

After she began living with Suimei and the others, whenever her loneliness became unbearable, she would cling to one of them for comfort. In part thanks to this acquired behavior, she became much more aware of what it meant to be close with someone. To be doted on and loved. It was something she hadn’t had much experience with up until now. But even then, when she was alone at night or when she recalled what life was like before meeting Rogue, her thoughts would turn dark. She couldn’t escape the feeling that things would just turn out like before, which was immensely painful.

It was at times like that that she sought the embrace of one of her three friends, which was a great comfort to her wounded heart. She knew she was well past the age such behavior was considered acceptable, but Lefille told her not to hold back. That she deserved this and more for every time she’d been denied the warm embrace of a loved one as a child.

Loneliness was something that could settle in without any specific trigger. Such was the case today.

“Who... should I pick... today?”

While walking towards the guest room, Liliana was thinking about who she should demand attention from. If everything was going as usual, everyone should have finished their business for the day and be gathering there for a bit of tea and relaxing right about

now.

Liliana normally decided on her cuddling partner by rotation. If she clung to a single person all the time, she would end up being a nuisance to them. So after having Lefille dote on her, next would be Felmenia, and after her would be Suimei, and so on. But while that was the general pattern, she took into account extraordinary circumstances and would sometimes jump forward in the order when it was necessary to accommodate one of her friends.

For the past few days, Suimei had been rather busy organizing all the data that he'd brought back from the darkwood forest regarding the hero summoning ritual. And because he'd been so occupied, Liliana had been leaning on the other two. As such, she was planning on asking him today for a change, but...

"Suimei, please cuddle with... me?"

What she saw when she opened the door was three young girls glaring daggers at each other with Suimei was standing in the middle of it all, dumbfounded and terrified.

With just a glance, the intelligent Liliana was able to discern what had happened. The fact that her voice had been somewhat drowned out by the creak of the door opening was a stroke of good fortune on her part. Not realizing anything was wrong, the young girls simply glanced her way without saying anything before returning to their standoff.

Suimei, however, was trapped in a situation that felt rather like being on a bed of nails, and beheld Liliana with a relieved expression. To him, she looked like help that had come from the heavens.

"H-Hey, Liliana. What's up?" he asked in an awkward and pathetic voice.

In response, Liliana slowly began to shut the door as she stepped back out into the hall.

"It's... nothing. I'll just... be going now. Goodbye..."

"No, wait. Don't go back. Don't say goodbye. Stay here. Please. I'm begging you."

"Don't mind me... Good luck."

"Hey, hey, hey! WAIT! Didn't you come here because you needed something? You said something just now, right? You asked for cu-something or other, right?"

It was obvious that Suimei was desperately trying to keep Liliana in the room, and all eyes now fell on her. The visiting

Hatsumi in particular looked rather scary.

“That child... Liliana-chan, right? It sounded like she just said something about cuddling...”

So someone had heard her after all... Hatsumi shifted her narrowed eyes to Suimei. A hero's keen senses were not to be underestimated. But neither was her strength. Suimei knew exactly what she was implying, and his voice cracked as he replied.

“Ah... Ahaha! Yeah, that's... That's, um...”

“Don't tell me you've been doing indecent things to such a small child.”

“There's no way I would do anything indecent to Liliana!”

“Then what's this about?”

“What? No, really, that's...”

As Hatsumi watched Suimei hem and haw, her eyes narrowed even further. It was just like she was looking at some lowly insect. Even Liliana couldn't help but shudder at the sight.

It was true Suimei was guilty of cuddling with Liliana, but that was it. He'd never once done it with wicked intentions. He himself had lost his family, so he understood all too well the loneliness she felt. And to help alleviate those terrible feelings, he spoiled her from time to time.

But before he could explain all that to Hatsumi with this kind of tension in the room, surely she would snap and kill him first. (Little did he know she was on edge after having discovered how Felmenia and Lefille felt about him.)

Seeing that Suimei was hard pressed to give her a proper explanation, Hatsumi began reached down for the sword at her waist. Hearing the deadly sound of metal sliding against metal, Suimei let out an unprecedented pathetic yelp.

“Um, you see...”

“That's actually...”

Felmenia and Lefille tried to come to his defense, but were having trouble finding a lifeline to throw him. After all, it was true that Liliana had come to ask Suimei to cuddle with her. It would be impossible for them to deceive Hatsumi on that front. Really, the only one who could salvage this situation was Liliana herself.

Right now, Hatsumi was closing in on Suimei with a dreadfully menacing aura that easily surpassed that of a demon. In fact, she looked like she might *be* the Demon Lord. And Liliana certainly wasn't the only one who thought so. She had never seen the Demon

Lord personally, but there was no other being she could think to compare Hatsumi to right now. Nevertheless, she stepped in front of her to keep her from getting to Suimei.

“Hero Hatsumi, I did not say ‘cuddle,’ but ‘cudgel.’ I came here to get a more detailed explanation of the cudgel magicka Suimei taught me, which is what I asked him about when I entered. You must have misheard me.”

Under the tension of confronting the maddened hero, Liliana had slipped into mechanical report mode. She’d done her best, but it was still quite the lame excuse. Hatsumi’s grim expression didn’t change at all.

“Hmph. If that’s the case, then why are the three of them having such a hard time saying it?”

“A magician’s magickas are secret arts. They must be kept hushed and treated with all propriety. As such, the three of them were reluctant to speak on the matter out of sheer force of habit.”

“But...”

“Hero Hatsumi, I’m sure I needn’t ask, but do I look to you like such a pathetic child that I need to be cuddled?”

Liliana tried approaching things from a different angle. It was a life-and-death gamble that would decide Suimei’s fate. And when it came time to show her hand... Hatsumi grumbled reluctantly. Liliana’s physique was on the childish side, but her demeanor and manner of speaking were mature enough that Hatsumi came to realize she might have misjudged her age.

“No, you’re quite right. I apologize.”

“I must also apologize for saying anything that invited such a misunderstanding.”

Bringing the matter to an end, Liliana bowed her head. She’d won the bet and Suimei’s life, but it wasn’t all good news. Now that that much was settled, a certain thought suddenly crossed her mind. As a consequence of all this, she wouldn’t be able to cuddle with Felmenia or Lefille either until Hatsumi left.

“Hmph...”

She was already at her limit waiting for cuddles. Grumbling under her breath about Suimei’s philandering ways, she slightly puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“So... just what’s going on here, you three? Though... I have something of an idea... without even having to ask.”

“That’s what I wanna know! You three have been kinda weird

since I got here.”

“Suimei... please be quiet.”

“Oof...”

After shushing Suimei, Liliana returned her gaze to Hatsumi, who childishy looked away.

“It’s nothing. There’s nothing going on with me.”

It was then that Lefille, who had been keeping a watchful eye on the situation, piped up.

“Oh? Is that so?”

“Huh?! That’s, um...”

Seeing Hatsumi’s bewilderment, Lefille cast a sidelong glance her way. In a fluster, it sounded like she might be changing her story.

“You just said there’s nothing going on, right?” Lefille pressed.

Hatsumi’s eyes darted left to right, up and down. They, much like her heart, seemed to be restless. All she could manage in the way of a reply was mumbling.

“You are not speaking clearly,” Felmenia said with something of a grim expression.

“By the way, Lady Hatsumi... What’s wrong with Prince Weitzer?”

Hearing Lefille’s question, Hatsumi’s face instantly turned bright red.

“I don’t have that kind of relationship with Weitzer! A-And when you say it like that, you make it sound like I’m in l-l-l-l-love with this guy or something!”

“Am I wrong?”

“You’re wrong! Both Weitzer and this guy are wrong!”

After clamoring that everything was wrong, Hatsumi puffed out her cheeks in an angry pout and turned away. It was perfectly transparent that she was just being stubborn. (To everyone but Suimei, that is.) But it seemed Lefille had also grown somewhat embarrassed as she petitioned her next question awkwardly.

“Th-Then... there’s no problem with us getting along with Suimei-kun, right?”

“Th-That’s...”

“Getting along” was just vague enough that Hatsumi was having a problem objecting to it. And as she struggled to come up with an answer, Suimei—who still didn’t really understand what was going on—joined the conversation that he really should have

just stayed out of.

“Hey, Hatsumi, I’m a bit lost, but why get so worked up about it? There’s nothing wrong with everyone getting along, right?”

“...And just what do you mean when you say ‘getting along’?”

“What? I mean...”

As Suimei fumbled for words, Hatsumi puffed her cheeks up even more before blowing her lid altogether.

“What?! After all that ‘it’s my job to save her’ talk?! I heard all about it from Selphy!”

“Huh, wuh? What? No, I mean, I remember saying that, but...”

“Didn’t you say you were going to protect me?!”

“Yeah, but isn’t that normal? We’re family.”

“It’s not normal!”

“Wait, what?”

Getting a completely different reply from what he was expecting, Suimei was left dumbstruck. He’d taken a stand to protect a precious family member—and he was completely at a loss having that turned around on him. What else could that possibly mean? It seemed Felmenia was wondering as well.

“Suimei-dono, I would also like to ask in detail just what you were thinking when you made such a claim.”

“I’m also curious,” agreed Lefille. “Very curious indeed.”

“Spit it out!” barked Hatsumi.

The three of them were steadily closing in on Suimei. It was a rather pitiful sight, but he was merely reaping what he’d already sown.

“U-Uh, um... Hey, guys... If you raise your voices and cause a fuss, you’ll bother the other guests staying here, so could you be a little quieter and more amicable? Maybe?”

Suimei tried to smooth things over, but...

“It’s alright, Suimei. Just a moment ago... I put up a sound-isolating barrier... around the entire room.”

“Oh, cool. Thanks for— Wait, that’s not what I meant at all!”

“Was I wrong?”

“Well, I can’t say you were wrong to do it, but... Damn it, Liliana! That was on purpose, wasn’t it?!”

Liliana was currently making the thumbs up gesture that Suimei had taught her, and then turned it upside down. And down, down he fell, far into the depths of hell. There would be no escape. If Liliana couldn’t have her cuddles, it was only fair that Suimei pay

the price with equal suffering.

“M-My allies...”

“You have none. If you cut somebody, you will wet your own body with blood, as they say.”

Hearing Liliana repeat the saying she’d once used against him, Suimei’s shoulders drooped in an utterly crestfallen fashion. But the group of girls encircling him showed no mercy in their approach.

“So, Yakagi, about what we were talking about... Care to explain?”

“Didn’t I?! I said I just wanted to protect my family. There’s no particular meaning to it other than that...”

“Talking like that can *only* give way to misunderstandings!”

“Indeed. It seems I need to teach you a thing or two about speaking in such vague terms.”

“Suimei-dono, I told you that you must speak up and express yourself clearly!”

The dirty looks the girls had been shooting at each other earlier now all fell on Suimei.

“Why are all of you suddenly colluding...?”

Consequently, he would be on the receiving end of their nagging and sermons for quite some time.



“Well, it’s about time I go back,” Hatsumi announced.

“I’ll see you off...” Suimei replied like a lifeless zombie.

For a while now, he had been interrogated and lectured. It left him so utterly drained that he was completely disheartened and on the verge of just blacking out. In spite of it being the afternoon and quite sunny, the very spot where he stood radiated gloom.

After Hatsumi said her farewells, Lefille and Felmenia also stood from their seats.

“We will come along as well.”

“That sounds great. Shall we all see her off together?”

“What...? Um, I should really be fine on my own...”

Before she knew it, Hatsumi had an entire entourage volunteering to go with her. Thinking it would be a bother, she tried to decline them, but it seemed they weren’t simply trying to be polite in offering her an escort.

“That’s... not it. With everyone around you... it’ll be harder...”

for anyone to discover you.”

“Ah, I get it!”

Hatsumi clapped her hands when she heard Liliana’s explanation. She was also somewhat uneasy about hiding her identity with only a robe. But if everyone walked in a wall around her, it would be much harder for the military police to see her face. With their plan settled, Suimei and the others surrounded Hatsumi and left the boarding house. After walking down the street towards the palace a ways, Hatsumi suddenly turned to Lefille.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I ended up shouting all kinds of things...”

“We don’t particularly mind. There’s no need to apologize.”

Lefille accepted her apology with a refreshing smile. Suimei looked at her like she was crazy and meant to object, but Felmenia scowled at him. Remembering what he had just gone through with a frown, he found himself unable to say a word.

“Goodness me. Really, it is all Suimei-dono’s fault for saying things that invite misunderstandings in the first place... Hero-dono, we all said a great deal earlier, but I do hope we can get along from now on.”

“Huh? Get along?”

Hatsumi was under the impression that she and the other girls had all acknowledged each other as rivals, so Felmenia’s proposal came as something of a surprise. Seeing her confusion, Lefille shook her head and explained.

“That is that, and this is this. There’s no need to compare apples and oranges, is there?”

“That’s how we see it, Hero-dono.”

“You might be onto something there... Mm, all right. Let’s get along.”

“I don’t know what you guys are talking about, but I’m fine with it if it means everyone’s going to get along now...”

With things finally taking a turn for the pleasant, Suimei took in a big breath of the freshly cleared air and let out a relieved sigh. His peace wouldn’t last for long, however. Sensing something else afoot, Liliana got his attention.

“Suimei... There’s a commotion up ahead.”

“Hmm?”

Upon hearing Liliana’s report, Suimei focused his eyes forward. There was indeed something going on further down the street.

“What? A riot in broad daylight? You gotta be kidding me.”

Whatever was happening had gone well beyond the scale of a mere brawl. There was a fairly large mass of people rampaging violently. The shouting was audible even from a distance, and it was only growing louder and angrier.

“I wonder what happened...”

“This can’t be anything good.”

Spotting a man fleeing from the uproar, Suimei questioned him as he passed by.

“Excuse me. About the commotion... Did something happen?”

“I-I dunno. Those guys... We thought they were just gonna get on their soapboxes like normal, but they suddenly got violent.”

“Those guys?”

“I dunno, man. If you wanna know, go ask someone else!”

With that, the man quickly ran off down the street in the opposite direction of the uproar, leaving Suimei and the girls in the dust. Realizing they wouldn’t get any answers out of the panicking crowd, they gradually made their way through the increasing waves of people fleeing the riot. And eventually, at the source of the commotion, they found...

“These guys...”

“We saw them before, right? The Anti-Goddess something or other?”

Through a break in the crowd of people, they could see several figures in white religious garb carrying metal canes. Lefille had introduced them to Suimei as a suspicious cult that liked to sermonize in town.

But there wasn’t just one or two of them this time. There was quite a mass of them all acting together as they struck their canes against the ground and tore down the eaves and fences of the surrounding houses. And strangest of all, not a single one of them was saying a single word. They were like a silent, violent assembly line, attacking one building after another. It was an odd, strangely eerie sight.

Suimei could hear angry, confused shouts from the crowd asking the odd group what they were doing and calling for them to stop, but the white-robed figures ignored all such pleas like they couldn’t even hear them. There were probably plenty of people who’d tried to talk them down before Suimei and the girls arrived, but it seemed all such efforts had ended in vain.

“They’re coming... this way,” Liliana warned.

“What do... Well, guess I don’t need to ask, huh?” Suimei murmured.

“Isn’t it obvious that we’re going to subdue them?!” Hatsumi retorted.

“Naturally,” Lefille simply declared.

It seemed they both found Suimei’s question rather foolish. They wasted no time in acting, either. They stepped forward and began taking out the armed cult members. Hatsumi used her sword in its sheath to precisely strike her opponents’ vitals to stop them from moving without mortally wounding them. Lefille was also using her enormous sword in its sheath to beat down the cult members. Shrieks like frogs being stepped on filled the air.

Before the skill of the two talented swordswomen, the cult members were utterly defenseless and fell on the spot. But just as Hatsumi and Lefille thought that they had brought the commotion to an end, they realized that more people in white robes were pouring out of the nearby alleyways.

“Hang on, just where are these guys all coming from...?”

As Hatsumi’s baffled voice reached his ears, Suimei looked over to where the cult members were appearing and activated a far sight spell. He used his magically enhanced vision to follow the line of white robes all the way to its source, and...

“Hey, yo, hold up... This isn’t the only god damn place these guys are rampaging around?!”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re rioting like this all over the city in every direction. Looks like they haven’t gotten to the palace yet, though...”

But even so, they were still stirring the city into an uproar. Hearing Suimei’s report, Hatsumi knocked down the cult member in front of her and turned around.

“Yakagi, where’s the most concentrated chaos?”

“Hang on... Around the blacksmithing district. The guys over there don’t just have canes, they’re armed with actual weapons.”

“They probably raided the workshops there. Suimei-kun, what are the military police doing?”

“Looks like it’s taking all they’ve got just to chase down the robed guys appearing all over the place, but there’s just not enough of them... They’re normally just loitering around in droves. Didn’t security get strengthened after what happened last time?”

"I can only guess, but I assume most of them are at the palace."

"So because of that, everywhere else is basically defenseless? There's way too few... Ah."

Suimei suddenly made a face like he'd realized something while he was talking. Picking up on this, Felmenia questioned him.

"Is something the matter?"

"Suimei... You also noticed... didn't you?" Liliana asked in turn.

Suimei nodded back to her. But it seemed it wasn't just him who'd noticed. Lefille nodded too. Suimei then took a moment to explain things to Felmenia and Hatsumi, who both looked clueless.

"It's likely that they're mixing in with the supplemental guards or something."

From those few words alone, Hatsumi's expression turned sour like she'd just remembered something unpleasant.

"Ugh, it's like the modus operandi of a certain terrorist organization..."

"My thoughts exactly."

It differed slightly from what she was referring to, but it certainly did smack of terrorist behavior they'd heard of in West. Terrorists would mix in with refugees, tourists, and immigrants to make their way across international borders in order to carry out their deadly deeds. Wolves were blending in with the sheep, just like was going on here.

Once all the cult members in the immediate area were taken care of, Suimei called out to Hatsumi.

"What are you gonna do? Go to the palace?"

"You said the blacksmithing district was where it's really going down, right? I'll head there."

"You would, huh?"

That much was to be expected of her sense of responsibility. That serious side of her hadn't changed at all, even after she'd lost her memories.

"Then... I will open up... a path for us."

Liliana emerged at the front of the group, tottering along like usual. She then thrust out her index finger like she was pointing at the approaching group of white-robed figures that stood between them and the blacksmithing district. She brought her arm into her line of sight and held it up perfectly level with the ground. Then she pushed her finger forward ever so slightly.

"Bang, bang!"

Immediately after making those imitative sounds with her mouth, the cult members straight in front of her were thrown into the members behind them with terrifying force. The whole line of white-robed figures started to fall like dominoes, each one screaming as they dropped.

“Ugeh!”

“Hey, what are you— Gwah!”

“Wh-What?! H-Hey! Oof!”

They were standing so close together that each one who fell kept crashing into the next in succession. But even though they were practically taking themselves out, Liliana continued childishly mimicking the firing of a gun, sending more and more of the cult members flying into each other. Since her attack was one with no physical substance, the cult members at the front weren’t even preparing magical shields to defend themselves. Felmenia made a curious expression as she watched this play out.

“Suimei-dono, what’s that Lily is using?”

“It’s a kind of exorcism *magicka* that makes use of the ethereal. It extends your astral body to directly strike your opponent’s.”

It was but one of many spells that fell under the great umbrella of exorcism *magicka*. It made use of the idea behind an out of body experience to purposefully manipulate one’s ethereal nature as an exorcism technique.

Using a guide like one’s finger or a staff, one could give their ethereality direction, extending it with force to push away an opponent’s astral body. And because the astral body and the physical body had an inseparable bond, when the astral body was sent flying, the physical body would be pulled right along with it, sending both of them flying together.

So in short, it was an astral attack, and could be considered quite powerful *magicka*. But as Suimei explained all this, Felmenia looked quite dissatisfied for some reason.

“You never taught me this *magicka*...”

“Come to think of it, I guess not, huh?”

“You *guess* not? Why did you not teach it to me?”

Felmenia seemed angry that she hadn’t been taught the technique, and drew nearer to Suimei as she addressed him critically.

“Don’t pout just ’cause I taught her things a little out of order...”

"It is not just a little!"

"Technically, this isn't even a particularly high-level spell."

"Even so!"

There, she started yelling. She was far more obstinate than Suimei imagined. In a surprisingly unusual turn for her, she was being quite selfish. While they were having this little exchange, Hatsumi cut in and spoke up in a slightly reproachful voice.

"Hey, would you guys mind saving this for later?"

"Y-You are right. My apologies..."

"They'll all... be down soon. When the way is clear... let's start running."

At Liliana's behest, the group made a break for it and crossed the bridge. On the other side, they arrived in the blacksmithing district. They were expecting to find cult members everywhere like Suimei had seen through his magicka, but...

"The uproar settled down?"

The street was lined with stores and smithies, so it had a rather eccentric look compared to other districts, but right now, it was surprisingly desolate. The signs and boxes left outside the shops were all damaged, but they couldn't hear any shouting or ruckus in the area. It was like the storm had already passed through.

"Yakagi, I thought you said the chaos was concentrated here?"

"Yeah. Up until now, it was, but... Just what does this mean?"

Suimei observed their surroundings dubiously. There was nobody around. Were the people of the district and the dwarves who ran the smithies hiding indoors? The fact that not even the violent cult members were around was still quite the mystery to him. While he was looking around, he caught sight of a shadow approaching them from up ahead. They weren't alone after all. Listening carefully, he could hear several sets of footsteps.

So they've come.

And just as he was thinking that, what appeared along with several robed figures was...

"This is..."

"So it's come to this."

"How... unexpected."

"Hey, wait... Seriously?"

Felmenia, Lefille, Liliana, and Suimei all raised surprised voices upon seeing the person standing at the center of the group of cult members. It was someone they knew well.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, hero of the Alliance, Hatsumi Kuchiba."

It was Sister Clarissa, who spoke as if she'd known Hatsumi was coming. Hatsumi, however, was the only person unfamiliar with her, and made a puzzled expression upon hearing this.

"A cat-eared nun?"

"I am called Clarissa. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

With that, Clarissa bowed elegantly towards Hatsumi. Hatsumi, after seeing everyone else's reactions to her, turned to Suimei for answers.

"This someone you know?"

"Well, we've met before, but..."

While Suimei was talking to Hatsumi, Lefille turned a question to Clarissa herself.

"Sister Clarissa, are you aware that the people standing behind you are causing a disturbance?"

"Yes, I am fully aware."

"From what I can see, you appear to have no connection to them. Just what is the meaning of all this? I'd like to get a definitive answer from you."

Lefille intensely pressed her for an answer, but it wasn't Clarissa that replied.

"Hahh... There's nothing particularly definitive about this, though."

"Jill!"

Jillbert lackadaisically walked out of an alleyway with a sigh. And then, as if to clearly declare her side, she took her position right next to Clarissa. She was dressed the same as always, in functional and easy to move in clothing. But today, on top of her dainty shoulder leaned an unsuitably large halberd. It had a long, fat grip that seemed too large for her tiny hands, and an axe blade with a spear tip that was almost as large as she was. As she dropped the halberd from her shoulder to the ground, it shook the ground along with a loud and dull noise.

"Yo, legal loli."

"I keep telling ya, I don't understand a word you say, you damn pedophile... But more importantly, you're surprisingly calm about this, aincha?"

"Well, yeah. From what Sister here just said, I've more or less grasped the situation."

Seeing that Suimei had figured something out, Hatsumi turned to him again.

“Yakagi, what’s going on?”

“It’s déjà vu. Isn’t it kinda similar to when Eanru showed up?”

“Ah!”

Hearing that, Hatsumi saw the connection for herself. Hearing her surprised acknowledgment, Clarissa spoke up again.

“If you know what’s going on, then it will save us some time.”

“Then, Sister, does that mean you are a companion of the dragonnewt who attacked Suimei-dono and Hero-dono?”

“Yes, White Flame-dono, it’s exactly as you’ve surmised.”

“And so these guys are also your allies? For a nun of the Church of Salvation to bring along members of an opposing cult... It’s quite ironic, isn’t it?”

“Certainly, it’s quite a funny story.”

Clarissa began giggling in a refined manner. Meanwhile, Suimei and the others recognized the threat at hand and were each preparing for battle. The one who seemed most dismayed over this development, however, was Jillbert.

“Haaaaahh, why did it have to come to this?”

“Seriously. Jill, if you’re on her side, that means you’re also our enemy, right?”

“That’s how it goes. Honestly, I’d rather not be, but...”

From Jillbert’s way of speaking, she seemed completely unenthusiastic about the whole situation. She wasn’t particularly happy about having to antagonize Lefille, who she’d actually grown to be quite close with. And as if scolding her, Clarissa raised her voice.

“Jill, there’s no use in complaining.”

“I know there’s nothing that can be done about it, but... I was just wondering why things had to end up bringing Lefi and the others in opposition to us.”

“Do you still not understand?”

“Hah?”

Hearing Clarissa’s puzzling declaration, Jillbert made a curious expression. Clarissa then turned her gaze to Hatsumi.

“Hero Hatsumi, we are in need of your power. Could you possibly come along with us?”

“And your reason?”

“Right now, I can only request that you come along.”

“Then I refuse. I have things that I must do myself, so please ask someone else for assistance.”

“Even if I say... that I must insist you come with us by any means?”

“I still refuse. Do you really think I can trust people who do things like this?”

Exactly as expected, negotiations quickly broke down. Just based on the fact that they acknowledged they were Eanru’s companions, it was already clear that a peaceful compromise was out of the question. But after trying unsuccessfully to solicit Hatsumi, Clarissa turned to Suimei.

“As for Suimei-sama and company, I would like you to remain silent and look the other way, but...”

“I refuse.”

“I suspected as much.”

As they showed clear hostility towards her, Clarissa simply nodded like she understood.

“You didn’t exactly have to ask, Clara. The answer was pretty obvious. Eanru reported he was a relative of the hero’s. There was no question that he would oppose us here.”

“It was just in case.”

Clarissa calmly replied to Jillbert’s frankness before turning back to Suimei and the others.

“Well then, I shall be Lefille-san’s opponent.”

“Sorry.”

“There is no need for that, Jill. If you would, please take care of Suimei-sama and the rest.”

Immediately after they decided how they’d be dividing the fight, more cultists began appearing from the alleyways perfectly on cue. Seeing that they were now surrounded, Suimei’s group formed a circle with their backs to each other.

“If they’re that asshole dragon’s companions, then we can’t be careless.”

“You’re right. So what’s the plan?”

“First, we should create an escape path so that we can get away safely no matter what happens. As for who should do what...”

“The nun has already declared her intent to fight me.”

“Please be careful... Lefille. She is likely... a therianthrope... of the liger clan.”

“The liger clan, you say? I thought so...”

Lefille and Liliana seemed to be on the same page. Felmenia was also making a sour face upon hearing their exchange.

“Hey, what’s this about a liger clan?” Suimei asked.

“They’re the ancestors of all feline therianthropes. And of all the beast races, it’s no exaggeration to say that they’re the strongest,” Felmenia replied.

“Wuh, seriously...?”

“First a dragonnewt and now this...”

Upon learning they were faced with yet another powerful opponent, both Suimei and Hatsumi sounded disheartened. In stark contrast, Lefille sounded ready for battle.

“A worthy opponent then,” she bared her fangs and muttered fearlessly.

Suimei then took a look around at the cult members surrounding them.

“We should do something about the white robes first. Menia, please keep an eye on Jillbert.”

“Understood.”

As Suimei and the others were busy discussing their plans, the cultists were slowly closing in. When Lefille leaped out towards Clarissa, Clarissa put her hands into her opposing sleeves.

A hidden weapon.

Having such a premonition, Lefille put herself on guard. But when Clarissa took her hands out, there was only red and yellow powder that almost resembled paint pigment on her fingers. Rolling up her sleeves, Clarissa drew sharp lines with her fingers along her face and arms in a peculiar pattern.

“That’s...”

Suimei squinted at it, feeling he’d seen the pattern somewhere before. And just as he started to think he must be mistaken, Clarissa finished her ritual. Sharp claws extended from her fingers and her canines grew out long enough to reach her chin. Seeing her transformation, Hatsumi and Suimei both raised their voices in shock.

“A saber-toothed tiger?”

“Hey, a Smilodon ain’t no cat...”

As the two of them stared in wonder, ferocious mana began stirring around Clarissa. It was like a predator’s bloodthirst had manifested in the air, which reminded Suimei of something he had seen before.

“Totemism...”

“I am surprised you know it.”

Clarissa had clearly heard Suimei’s quiet mutter, and confirmed his suspicions with a smile. Suimei’s expression, meanwhile, was quite stiff.

“That’s my line. How do you know that kinda thing, Sister?”

“Regarding that... Let’s just say it’s a secret.”

“Shit, there really is something behind all you guys...”

As Suimei groaned bitterly, Lefille—Clarissa’s opponent—called out to him.

“Suimei-kun, what is that?!”

“Totemism is a technique categorized under sensory magicka in my world! Using various symbolic items, it allows the user to mimic the power of flora and fauna! In her case, she’s probably receiving divine protection from the face and body paint she just used! In most cases, the power in question comes from beasts, but...”

“You’re saying she’s receiving power from the liger clan’s ancestral beast, the saber-toothed tiger, right?”

By “ancestral beast,” Lefille was referring to the animal that a therianthrope’s features were derived from. Clarissa likely possessed great instinctual power to begin with, but using totemism, that power was enhanced several times over. Just based on the fact that she was a therianthrope, there was no mistaking that she had a close relation to her ancestral beast and its symbols. All it took was a ritual to activate its power within her.

“Totemism is magicka from my world, but because the principle of the spell is quite primitive, it isn’t impossible that it’s been established in this world. But... you see the problem, right?”

“Just now, Sister recognized the name Suimei-dono used for it—a term that comes from your world. In other words...”

It meant Clarissa—or rather, Clarissa’s group—had some sort of connection to the world Suimei was from. It made him think back to Romeon’s case. There was something there. Something like a dark shadow flickering around these people.

Lefille and Clarissa wasted no time squaring off.

“Clarissa Liger. Here I come.”

“Oh spirits that reside within my body, answer my call...”

No sooner than Lefille finished her chant did a vortex of red wind build up around her, ripping through the blue sky. And the moment Clarissa unleashed her fighting spirit, her ferocious mana

sliced through the air like silver slashes. Then they came at each other. Lefille let fly one powerful slash after the other, but Clarissa was evading them with sharp movements, returning her slashes with fierce attacks from her claws.

Perhaps because she was strengthened by totemism, or perhaps because of the ferocious mana forming a sort of barrier around her, Lefille's red wind had practically no effect on her. Normally, that red wind would have blown Clarissa away. And if that didn't work, Lefille could ride it to make an incredible, decisive attack. But neither seemed to be possible now.

Clarissa's combat ability was on par with or even beyond Lefille's, meaning she possessed strength that rivaled Demon General Rajas. While observing their battle with sidelong glances, Suimei and the others were each dealing with the cultists swarming in on them in their own ways. Hatsumi with her sword, Felmenia with wind magicka, and Liliana with the exorcism magicka she was using before. Between the group of them, they were making serious headway.

As for Suimei, he was snapping his fingers, the violent sound of which played out like a rhythm as he continuously unleashed his strike magicka. It didn't take long before the ground was carpeted with the white-robed figures.

"That's the end of the idiots surrounding us! I'll go and help... Huh, wha?!"

Just as Suimei started to call out to Lefille, a magicka circle suddenly appeared at his feet. Even with all the magicka circles he could summon himself, he didn't recognize this one at all. The words, numbers, and design within it were all brand new to him.

"My foot is sinking?! Hey, it can't be... This is a hole to the spirit world?!"

As if he had stepped into a bottomless bog, Suimei's body began sinking into the magicka circle. He attempted to struggle and use flight magicka, but was unable to escape the circle. The spell's structure seemed to be interfering with Suimei's magicka and negating it as it swallowed his body, which was now sunken halfway into the ground.

"Suimei-dono, take my hand!"

As Felmenia thrust out her hand, Suimei smacked it away with a severe expression.

"You can't! If you grab on to me, you'll just get dragged in too!"

“But—”

“I’ll manage somehow! I’ll be right back, so I need you and the others to take care of—”

Before he could finish talking, Suimei sank away into the ground. With a ripple like he had fallen into water, the magicka circle trembled. Seeing this happen before their very eyes, Felmenia and the others were touched by astonishment and despair.

“S-Suimei-dono...”

“Impossible... Suimei was...”

“You gotta be kidding...”

The fact that Suimei had been caught by magicka was as big of a shock to them as if heaven and earth had been suddenly reversed. Facing the consequences of that, they were more flustered than ever before.

“Just now, who could have...?”

It meant that there was someone around who was capable of taking a magician of Suimei’s caliber. As Felmenia scanned the area, she saw no one who gave off that impression. And that only amplified her panic.

“Felmenia, we’ll talk later... Right now, everyone should focus... on the enemies before us.”

“We’re already down to one!”

Liliana and Hatsumi called out to Felmenia and urged her to focus on Jillbert. In response, Jillbert suddenly lifted her left arm into the sky.

“Unfortunately for you...”

Jillbert snapped her fingers and more cultists began appearing from the alleyways. Seeing that they kept coming and coming no matter how many of them were defeated, Hatsumi let out a groan.

“There’s no end...”

“Ain’t that obvious? The Hero of Salvation, a magician on par with Eanru, the Shrine Maiden of Spirits, and important mages from Astel and the Empire... With all of you as opponents, we literally couldn’t bring enough.”

Jillbert swung her arm down, unleashing a wave of power that gave birth to a violent wind. As it blasted forward, it ripped up the very ground beneath it. The first to react to Jillbert’s attack was Felmenia.

“Wind, be my guardian. Surround me and repel those who face me!”

Quickly putting her magicka to use, Felmenia shielded everyone from the incoming blast and fragments of earth. Seeing that, Jillbert flashed a broad grin.

“Ooh, nice.”

“What... was that just now?”

“That? Oh, nothing. I just swung my arm. There’s nothing to it, really. That damn dragonnewt can do something similar too.”

Suggesting that her technique wasn’t anything special, she spoke frivolously. The others could barely imagine just how much strength would be needed to bring about such a result.

“Alright, ’ere we go!”

Jillbert rotated her waist and brandished her weapon high overhead. Even though she was quite far away, she seemed to be aiming for something. Hatsumi immediately called for her allies to be wary, taking into consideration she might be able to attack outside of her physical range. However, completely skirting her prediction, Jillbert swung her halberd with her whole body behind it... sending the axe head flying from the haft.

“Wha?! A chain weapon!” Felmenia gasped.

“Damn right! This here’s my special chain halberd. Better hurry up and dodge it, kiddies!” Jillbert replied elatedly.

The axe was attached to the haft by a chain, which was sailing through the air. Using centrifugal force to her advantage, Jillbert drastically changed the trajectory of the axe by swinging the haft as it closed in on Felmenia and the others. As the attack came in from a blind spot, Felmenia immediately jumped out of the way to evade. And it was a good thing she did. The axe head hit the ground like an exploding meteor, sending dirt and rubble flying everywhere. Felmenia endured the wave of destruction, but groaned bitterly.

“What a completely muscle-headed fighting style...”

“I’ve only known how to fight like this since I was a kid. Well, I’ll let it pass that I don’t have any brains.”

With a smirk, Jillbert retracted the axe head to the haft of her halberd. On the other side, Liliana stepped forward.

“Felmenia... I’ll back you up.”

“That’s—”

“Hey, no! You stay away! I don’t wanna fight with little kids!”

At Liliana’s offer to fight, Jillbert suddenly started making a fuss. She didn’t want to fight against Lefille, nor she did she want to fight against children. Apparently she was a rather a picky

opponent.

“In that case... you don’t have to fight back.”

“But I can’t do that either! Aaaaah, damn it! Hey, White Flame! Don’t you dare use Liliana Zandyke as a shield, you hear?”

“Of course not!”

In response to Jillbert’s commanding tone, Felmenia yelled back like it hadn’t even needed to be said. To help cope with this rather unexpected situation, Hatsumi stepped forward too.

“Felmenia-san, I will take the front!”

“You have my thanks, Hatsumi-dono!”

Making good on her word, she immediately ran past Felmenia and bolted towards Jillbert at full speed. Her sword was still in its sheath, held at her waist so that she could draw at any moment. She was planning on letting out a slash while running, but as she approached, something came flying at her.

“Urgh!”

In no time at all, Hatsumi reacted by drawing her mithril sword to block. It caught two orichalcum daggers mid-strike. Looking down the daggers, Hatsumi saw a young girl in pure white vestments with a hood covering her eyes. She was holding the orichalcum daggers in a reversed grip, and was unrelenting in her attack. She unleashed a violent flurry of slashes, and Hatsumi responded in kind. Despite it being two blades against one, Hatsumi handled it skillfully while slowly falling back. She could see a flash of the girl’s eyes from under her hood every now and then, but they looked almost hollow, as if she wasn’t really focusing on anything.

“So you’re saying you’ll be my opponent?”

“...”

She questioned the girl, but received no reply. Like the other white-robed cultists, she was completely unresponsive... but something about this was different.

“That one’s one of your companions,” called Jillbert.

For a moment, Hatsumi thought of Selphy and the others upon hearing the word “companion,” but she quickly realized another grim possibility.

“A companion, you say...? You mean this person is also a hero?!”

“Bingo. Appropriate for the opponent of a hero, ain’t she?”

Hearing that question like she was being made light of, Hatsumi gave Jillbert a sharp scowl. The little girl’s eyes were completely

hollow, which made her think that her will had been taken. In other words...

“If I go along with you people, this is how I’ll end up, huh?”

“If you refuse to cooperate, yeah.”

After saying that, Jillbert once more held her halberd at the ready. This all happened as the afternoon sun began to fall low in the sky overhead.



“Lefille-san, I can perceive both anger and panic in your sword.”

On top of a triangular roof, Clarissa had her back to the red sun as she looked down on Lefille and admonished her. Some time had passed since the beginning of the fight, and it was now quickly approaching evening. As Lefille squinted up towards the dazzling setting sun, she turned a question to her opponent.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Exactly as I said. Your blade is impatient. Not so much that it is distracted, but it is certainly not in equilibrium.”

Lefille snorted as she denied Clarissa’s words.

“I fought an enemy once who used such wiles. In a desperate ploy to seize victory, they played a cowardly game in speaking nonsense to try and shake me.”

“This is a warning. You mentioned victory, but I have nothing to gain from this battle. If you knew our objective, you would naturally understand. Besides, have you not already realized it? To speak of victory so, you must already be shaken.”

“...I’d rather you not speak like you knew what I was thinking.”

“It would not hurt you to heed my warning. But I understand. There is nothing more bitter than hearing unneeded, meddlesome advice from someone with an advantage over you.”

Shrewd, and true. To hear a warning in the middle of a battle was in fact supremely irritating. Having that pointed out on top of everything only needlessly increased Lefille’s irritation.

She wanted to use her sword to shut Clarissa’s mouth. But she couldn’t easily do that in the position she was in, which frustrated Lefille even more. Clarissa wasn’t out of range where she was standing, but even if Lefille unleashed a wave of red wind from her sword, it would never actually hit her. And, unable to shut her up,

Lefille had no choice but to listen to Clarissa's belittling speech.

"Lefille-san, only by accepting such advice are people able to attain strength. For everyone to gain strength that will not lose to anyone, that is my wish. No, that is our wish."

Clarissa was making a grand sermon no one had asked to hear. In the moment, she truly looked like a priest from the Church of Salvation. However, Lefille had something to say herself.

"Then, Sister, I shall also give you some advice. Voicing your opinion to an opponent is only something you get to do after winning. Only once your foe is beaten to the ground to the point where they cannot speak do you earn the privilege of lecturing them."

"Certainly. It is exactly as you say. I am greatly obliged for your advice."

"Tch..."

She listened attentively. She extended her gratitude. Though Lefille reproached her severely, Clarissa respectfully bowed back to her from atop the roof. For her to remain so gracious in a situation like this really rubbed Lefille the wrong way.

"However," Clarissa scoffed, "if you obsess over such pride—which is useless as shit—it'll stick to you like a stain. There's not the tiniest amount of merit in dying in vain like a piece of trash."

What she said was completely unthinkable in light of her usual courteous attitude, which had suddenly become vulgar and seething. It was as if it was all to say, "You misunderstand." Lefille felt a chill run down her spine. But it seemed Clarissa was done with chitchat there. She then leaped off the roof in a flash and headed directly towards Lefille.

Her speed easily surpassed that of a beast and couldn't be followed by the naked eye. She bolted across the ground like a sword cutting through the air. She passed by Lefille's flank and attacked—Lefille couldn't actually tell whether it was with her claws or fangs.

"Ugh..."

All Lefille could see was her afterimage, which she chased with her sword. However, because she was unable to properly perceive her opponent, her slashes were all reckless. Each wild strike had enough power behind it to kill, but a sword that was just swung around in hopes of hitting its target never actually would.

"Hah!"

Trying to predicting the path of the afterimage, Lefille thrust out her sword clad in red wind again and again. But no matter how many times she did, her blade only ever cut through the air. Repeated failure frustrated her, a sense of panic welling in her chest. At this rate, she would lose. As that thought crossed her mind, Lefille tried to shake off the doubt in her heart. She simply couldn't accept defeat. She had promised herself she would never lose again.

"In that case...!"

If she couldn't hit, she just had to make it so that she could. Even if it meant sacrificing a finger to save the hand, so to speak. She would ignore the immediate consequences and hang everything on the exact moment she knew her slash would connect. She just had to make sure it was a killing blow. Resolving herself, Lefille opened herself to the attack lunging at her and brought her sword down with all her might.

"HAAAAAAAAAH!"

However...

"Too naive."

She missed. As she sensed that something had slipped in close to her, a reproachful voice was thrown at her.

"Guah!"

And then, Lefille was blown away by the shock that assaulted her. She could see that she was being struck with an elbow and managed to twist at the last second to avoid a strike to any of her vital areas, but she still suffered the full brunt of the attack. It sent her tumbling across the ground. She could hear Felmenia and the others screaming as well as Jillbert's angry shouting. Her consciousness faded for a moment, but determined not to faint here, she reeled it back with sheer willpower and used the force of her tumbling to spring back up.

"As one would expect of the Shrine Maiden of Spirits, I see."

"Tch..."

Clarissa swept her claws to the side as if shaking the blood off of them and began walking forward in a calm manner. She was simply overflowing with surplus composure. In contrast, it was Lefille who'd lost her cool, which only felt—painfully—like it drove home Clarissa's earlier point.

Suddenly, a magicka circle drew itself on the ground. Seeing that familiar scene, Lefille, Felmenia, and the others clenched their

jaws and readied themselves. However, what eventually emerged from the circle was none other than the one who'd fallen into it earlier: Suimei.

"I don't know who the hell it was, but they sure fucking did it..."

Down on one knee, Suimei appeared while quietly and profanely expressing his anger. He had changed into his black suit, but didn't seem to be injured in any way. Seeing this, Lefille called out to him.

"Suimei-kun, you're safe..."

"Yeah... Hey, are you alright, Lefi?!"

"Somehow or other..." she managed to say with a meager, forced smile. "But it's probably fair to say that I was defeated."

Kicking up dust as her feet slid along the ground, Clarissa was closing in on Lefille. As Lefille spoke in an irritated tone, she glanced bitterly at her from the corner of her eye.

Judging that Lefille was no longer able to move, Suimei covered for her. Clarissa seemed to be quite wary of engaging with him, however, and jumped back to put a large distance between them rather than continuing her attack. While she was biding her time, Suimei called out to the others to check up on them.

"Menia, how're things on your end?!"

"S-Somehow..."

"Hatsumi!"

"I've got my hands full here!"

"Tch..."

Felmenia had deployed protective magicka to defend against Jillbert's enormous chain halberd. She couldn't tell just where the attacks were coming from since the small dwarf manipulated the weapon midair, so her barrier extended in every direction. With Liliana's support behind her, the two of them were working together to pinpoint the impacts.

As such, they were able to defend successfully, but that was all they could do. Not too far from them, Hatsumi was swinging her sword, locked in combat with a small girl in a white robe. It looked like Suimei's only option would be to handle their opponents one at a time. Coming to that conclusion, Suimei conjured his mana.

"Yo, Clara!" Jillbert cried.

"I know!"

Clarissa took her distance from Suimei. Jillbert also returned

the axe head of her halberd to the haft and once more stood next to Clarissa.

“Jill, do not let your guard down. Suimei-sama defeated Romeon, and even Eanru considers him a worthy opponent.”

“I was wondering what he was up to, but I see now... This ain’t the ‘normal’ him. He’s cast aside that damn mask of his.”

Seeing Suimei’s with her own eyes, Jillbert stuck out her tongue at him. She and Clarissa both were also brimming with an intense fighting spirit. Seeing that they were holding nothing back, Suimei returned Jillbert’s words in kind.

“You don’t have a whole lot of room to talk about hiding behind masks.”

“Well, you got a point there.”

As Jillbert honestly conceded Suimei’s point, Clarissa once more made a proposal to him.

“Suimei-sama, could you not simply take Lefille-san and the others with you and withdraw?”

“That’s my line, Sister. I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but maybe you should just think of another way to do it. How about it?”

“If we could do so...” Jillbert began to answer.

But it was there that the flow of events changed dramatically.

“Clarissa, Jillbert. That is enough. Step back,” a deep, masculine voice said from on high.

As Suimei looked up into the red sky to locate the source of the voice, he spied the shadow of a person standing atop the point of a gabled roof.

“Tch, another damn— Hah?”

While he was in the middle of cursing, Suimei realized something strange. It was sundown. It would be dark before long, but right now the fiery setting sun was beaming on the whole city. Especially on a rooftop with no cover, this person’s figure should have been perfectly visible. Yet nevertheless, the one who had ordered Clarissa and Jillbert to retreat was nothing more than a hazy silhouette like a mirage.

“Let’s go,” his voice once more urged them.

“Is that alright?”

“The opportunity has passed. If we tarry, unnecessary things will get involved.”

“What do you mean by—”

Just as Clarissa questioned the mirage man, everyone could hear a nightingale chirping. And immediately following that, the world shook. It was a mysterious shaking of the air unlike an earthquake, and the chirping of the nightingale transformed into the sound let out by an enormous amount of iron creaking.

“...A mana field vibration with this kind of timing?”

Suimei raised a perplexed voice. As a magician, this shaking was a phenomenon he was very familiar with, but he couldn't understand what had caused it in the current situation. Moreover, comparing it to the shaking that was born of his own magicka, he was left with a rather unsettling feeling. Meanwhile, Jillbert raised a shocked voice at the bizarre phenomenon.

“Wh-What is this?!”

It seemed to be her first encounter with it, leaving her completely bewildered at the shaking which was altogether different from an earthquake. The same seemed to be true for Clarissa, who was standing next to her. She quickly looked around her surroundings while remaining vigilant of Suimei and the others.

“Calm down, Jillbert, Clarissa.”

“But Gottfried-sama!”

“Nothing is wrong. This is within the range of our assumptions. The shaking will calm down soon, and things will settle once more.”

And just as the voice said, the shaking did eventually stop. After confirming that everything had settled down, Felmenia called out to Suimei.

“Suimei-dono! What is this?”

“I don't even...”

Suimei didn't have a single clue as to what had caused it. Mana field vibrations were something that occurred when a high-order existence manifested, or sometimes even omens of the outbreak of grand magicka. But it didn't seem either was the case right now. However, simply the fact that the phenomenon had occurred was a sign of something. Just what was it? As Suimei wondered, he suddenly realized what time it was.

“Ah, it's twilight!”

It was the ambiguous hour between day and night, twilight. It was the hour it was possible for existences known as beasts of the apocalypse, or apparitions, to manifest in the physical world. As if to confirm his suspicions, the sun fell below the horizon and an indigo veil of darkness slowly crept over the ground. It seemed

concentrated in areas, and from those dark spots, pitch black beasts sprung forth.

“Wh-What are those?!”

The pitch black beasts—apparitions—were sprouting up one after the other in the area, shocking Hatsumi. Lefille, on the other hand, was relatively calm and observed the creatures she was unfamiliar with.

“Dogs... No, wolves?”

“They are somehow... quite creepy.”

The pitch black beasts reminded Liliana of the sinful figure and the sinister being. As they came into sight, she reflexively hid behind Lefille.

Certainly, just as Lefille had muttered, the beasts resembled both dogs and wolves. Their bodies were as black as could be, but the spots where eyes should have been were blood red. The shadows seemed to dance and sway around them. Felmenia stared in wonder at the creatures she had seen once before.

“These are like the monster that appeared at Castle Camellia that time... No, that phenomenon, was it? If I remember correctly, they are a manifestation of twilight syndrome.”

“Yeah, they’re apparitions. The one you saw last time was a B-grade apparition, and these are a smaller version of that. C-grade ones.”

Magicians called the shadowy part dog, part wolf creatures twilight syndrome. These in particular were C-grade apparitions. The first time the phenomenon was observed was in France, and was actually the origin of the phrase “entre chien et loup,” which established their general concept. The phrase “between a dog and a wolf” was also a metaphor meaning between safety and danger, which gave form to the phenomenon itself. It was about as ironic as it could get.

The behavior of the apparitions had no sense of regularity to it. Sometimes they simply lurked in the shadows, their red eyes shining. Sometimes they would howl towards the disappearing sun. Or sometimes, like now, they would attack. And it wasn’t just Suimei’s group—Jillbert and Clarissa were not exempt. As the apparitions closed in on them, Jillbert clicked her tongue.

“Tch, those things are also coming this way.”

“Leave them be, Jillbert. They can only be defeated by sword saints and magicians. It would be useless to raise your blade here.

Let us pull out.”

“I get that, but...”

“Gottfried-sama...”

Both Jillbert and Clarissa looked at him pleadingly as if to say something bad would happen if they retreated, but the mirage man standing atop the roof was unmoving.

“No. There is no need for us to defeat them. Even if we do nothing, that man will. He must. Isn’t that right...” Pausing there, the mirage man looked at Suimei. “Modern magician, disciple of the Magicka King Nestahaim?”

As he spoke of Suimei’s lineage, Suimei yelled out to the rooftop in a fluster.

“How do you know that?!”

He yelled, but the mirage man would not reply. It was as if he was simply toying with Suimei. Even though he couldn’t clearly make out the man’s face, Suimei was certain he could see a smile floating somewhere in the mirage.

“Everyone, we are pulling out.”

At the mirage man’s command, Clarissa, Jillbert, and the robed cultists began retreating.

“Wait! Answer my—”

“I have no obligation to answer you, but let’s see... I will at least tell you one thing. We are the Universal Apostles. You will do well to remember that.”

“Universal...?”

As Suimei was making a perplexed expression, perhaps to prevent any pursuit, the mirage man began chanting a spell.

“Code Pragmatic. Kenon who resists flames and carries mass. Using those concepts, obey my words, become one, and turn to mud.”

He was invoking the mystical. The moment Suimei sensed it, the space between his group and Clarissa’s was filled with a light made of mana that drew figures and symbols within it. Flames then began shooting out of it at random. As they spread through the area, everything was covered in a heat haze and began melting into red mud. And as the mud spread, so too did more flame, effectively creating a shield between the retreating group and the apparitions. The shadowy beasts chased after them, but were unable to make it through the fiery and muddy barrier.

The one who was most surprised at seeing all this was Suimei.

“That spell just now...”

He was completely unfamiliar with the symbols and figures used in it, but the spell itself was clearly not magic that used the Elements of this world. In other words, it was something more in line with his own magicka. He began putting the pieces together as he recalled something similar, but...

“Suimei-kun! I don’t know what you’re so shocked about, but now isn’t the time to be standing still!”

“Y-Yeah! You’re right!”

As Lefille called out to him, Suimei focused on the apparitions that were now headed towards them. He didn’t have time to think about anything else right now. The veil of darkness was already quite close, and the apparitions were just about to attack.

“Just as the eternal wind conveys! Send the shining and swaying flames to His side! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim dyed in white! Hear my voice! Thou art the Ishim that shakes off all calamity! Truth Flare!”

Felmenia unleashed her white flames upon the apparitions. And though the white incandescence mowed them down, they calmly remained where they were as if nothing had happened.

“Suimei-dono, what should we do about this?! Even though I used magicka, there wasn’t much effect!”

“Fall back! These guys can’t be defeated with regular magicka! Menia, take Liliana with you and head to the rear!”

“U-Understood!”

Following Suimei’s orders, Felmenia took Liliana, who was hiding behind Lefille, to the rear line furthest away from the darkness. Suimei then called to Lefille.

“Lefi, you fall back too! These guys are special...”

“Please wait. Let me test something out.”

Rather than falling back, Lefille gathered her red wind at the tip of her sword, turned it on the shadows where the apparitions were appearing from, and unleashed it. The red wind, which held a portion of the spirits’ powers, had an effect against apparitions. The ones caught in the turbulent red wind gushed blood as black as tar from their wounds as they crumbled to pieces.

“I can help. Leave these ones to me.”

“Wow... Yeah, okay. Then... Hatsumi?”

Suddenly, Suimei realized that his childhood friend was nowhere nearby. He quickly looked around to find her. When he

spotted her figure, she was already surrounded by apparitions.

“Wha...”

She'd been right beside him mere moments ago. Just how did she manage to get so far away? Under the dark curtain, Hatsumi was driving her sword into the constant swarm of apparitions, but it seemed her slashes had no effect at all on them. She was able to strike firmly and drive them back, but she was unable to deal a single wound.

When apparitions attacked humans, it was possible to ward them off successfully just by pushing them away. But that wouldn't eliminate the phenomenon itself. It would take more than physical blows to combat twilight syndrome.

“These things just keep multiplying...!”

While beating back the apparitions with her sword, Hatsumi's unease began to show.

“Hatsumi! It's no good! Fall back! I'll do something about...”

“Say what you will, but these guys will make it through before then at this rate!”

When she said that, Suimei finally realized what was going on. Hatsumi was standing at the head of the bridge. And on the other side of that bridge were droves of people. It was just Suimei and his companions on this side, all of whom were capable of defending themselves. But if even one apparition slipped across the bridge, it would be a slaughter. If the people used numbers to attack the apparitions, they would be able to hold them back to a certain extent, but...

“Shit, if it were just a little later, this would be easy...”

The sky was still bright enough that night hadn't fully fallen. Even if Suimei tried to use his magicka to call down the starry sky, it would have no effect. It was irritating that he couldn't defeat the apparitions all at once, but that just meant he had to take them out one by one. Firing spells as he ran over to Hatsumi...

“Kyah!”

Hatsumi had been knocked off balance. An apparition tackled her, sending her falling to the ground. The other apparitions seemed to sense it, and their doglike figures all jumped on her.

“Ah...”

A half gasp, half sigh of despair escaped her lips. But there was nothing she could do. Running was out of the question with her hands and feet pinned. Beholding the apparitions on top of her in

horror, her sword trembled in her shaking hand.

“Shit! HATSUMIIIIIIII!”

Seeing that she couldn’t move, Suimei came flying in without a care about his own well-being.



She was knocked down by the apparitions. Up until that point, her heart stood firm. But as her body fell to the ground, she was suddenly overcome with a fear that she couldn’t identify.

The apparition’s fangs, their claws... Thinking those things would kill her, her hand trembled, her heart trembled, and her body seized up. Even when she’d stood against demons, even though she’d faced this kind of crisis before, for some reason, she was completely frozen with terror this time.

I’m scared. This is terrifying...

As those words pounded within her head, she was no longer able to do anything. But then she realized this was all familiar. Wasn’t this the same as that time she’d fallen? It was a memory that haunted her. The canine monsters attacking her didn’t help any. It was all too much.

As she sensed the apparitions were about to go in for the kill, she shut her eyes as tightly as she could. She was petrified. But no matter how long she waited, the pain she was expecting didn’t come. When she curiously opened her eyes, a young man in a black suit was now standing over her. It was Suimei, holding a silver katana in his hands and breathing roughly. Perhaps because he’d been injured in saving her, the shoulder of his suit was torn to pieces.

“Ah—”

This too was the same as before. Just as when he faced off against the dragonnewt, he’d stood to protect her. It wasn’t the first time. No, far from it. She’d seen this scene in her dreams. It was a part of her past that she shouldn’t be able to remember.

How many times had it been now? How many times had he come to save her just like that? When she was wandering alone in the forest, when the dragonnewt appeared... And there was no telling how many times it had happened in the past.

She was pathetic like this. Why was she always so happy to have him protect her? Even though she was supposed to have

become stronger. Even though she had learned the ways of the sword. Even though she should have been able to fight... Despite all that, she was just trembling. Was this the person she really wanted to be?

“This is wrong.”

She hated being the only one who was protected. She wanted to become strong. She thought that if she remained as pathetic as she was, she would never be able to keep up with him. She would never be able to stay by his side as he protected others. That’s why...

“I’m... I’m different now.”

Yes, that was it. That was why. So that he wouldn’t leave her behind, she thought she would become strong. Yes, that’s why...

“I tried to get stronger with a sword...”

As soon as those words naturally came from her mouth, everything she’d forgotten came back to her like surging waves. Who she was, where she had been, who she was with, what she had been doing. Her past, her feelings. Every single memory without exception returned. While dazzled by the raging stream of memories, she gripped her sword strongly and stood up as Suimei called out to her in concern.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Sorry for causing you so much concern recently.”

“...?”

As he looked back at her with a curious glance, she repeated herself once more.

“I’m alright now.”

“Hatsumi, did you...?”

Just based on her words, he seemed to have noticed. As Suimei looked at her in shock, she focused her aim on the apparition that was leaping in at his flank. And then...

“My heart is the phantom of my sword’s blade, and becomes a technique to break the three kleshas that poison the heart of man. Cast my body aside like a rock, and give my life to the steadfast Kurikara...”

The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani. The words she quietly recited were a mantra passed down along with the sword techniques, the dharani. It wasn’t a chant like the ones Suimei would use, but once she recited them, her heart would calm itself and her consciousness would be completely focused on her sword.

An apparition couldn’t be defeated by a simple sword. No, a

mundane sword wouldn't even damage one. But it could ward them away and keep them at bay. As the apparition bared its black fangs, she sent it flying with her sword technique. Other apparitions were closing in from all four directions, but without panicking, she returned her sword to its sheath. And then...

"The Phantom Sword of the Kurikara Dharani, the Summit of Zen, the Enlightening Longsword that Leads to Serenity."

As she muttered just like she was reciting a dharani, she drew her sword. The instant she did, she swung it twenty-four times. And every single one of those strikes was driven into the apparitions.

All the people around her could see was a flash of silver lines. But every single apparition that leaped into those silver slashes was sent flying into the air. As they flew, Suimei hurled brilliant magicka at them that crumbled their bodies instantly.

"Hatsumi... So your memories returned, huh?"

Within remnants of his mana still lingering around them, Suimei looked relieved as if something unexpectedly happy had just happened. Hatsumi looked back at him as she spoke confidently.

"Suimei, I have a long list of complaints for you, but I'll at least start with my gratitude. Thank you."

She was being a little stubborn, though her gratitude was earnest. But for some reason, Suimei shuddered.

"Y-Your big brother would like to be spared from being smacked..."

"...You sure can talk, seriously. And since when are you my big brother?"

"Oh, you know, back in the day..."

"That was then, and this is now! But..."

Saying that, she recalled the memory that had terrified her earlier.

"It was... also a dog back then, wasn't it?"

"Huh? Oh, huh... Now that you mention it, something like this did happen, didn't it? Well, setting that aside..."

As Suimei signaled her to step back with his eyes, she shook her head.

"I hate that. I'm not running away."

"But..."

"I'll prevent them from reaching the other side, so you take care of defeating them."

She was going to fight too. She wanted to fight at his side.

Suimei gave a resigned sigh, then a fearless smile.

“Leave it to me.”

Hearing those reliable words, Hatsumi set out to do what she had to. She repelled all the apparitions that were trying to cross the bridge. Knowing she was unable to defeat them, all she could do was knock them down and back. As she did, Suimei thrust his hand towards the darkened sky. It seemed his preparations were complete.

“Intra velum. Noctis lacrimarum potestas. Insigne Olympus et terrae pingito. Infestato ad irrationabilis veritas. Caecato, pluvia incessabilis. Ea qui lugent sunt vitium. Ea qui fatentur sunt bonitas. Omne perveniunt ex luce supra tumultum, ex coruscis stellis.”

[Beneath the curtain. The majesty of the tears shed by the night. Colored by the symbol of heaven and earth. Infest towards the irrational truth. Dazzle, incessant rain. Those who lament are evil. Those who confess are virtuous. Everything comes from that light beyond the chaos, from the twinkling stars.]

A countless number of magicka circles of all sizes were floating in the night sky and moved as if they were guns pointing towards their targets. And then, the moment Suimei let out those last words, “Enth Astrarle,” light overflowed as far as the eye could see.

And after that light calmed down, the apparitions had vanished without a trace. Even the black holes in the ground they were coming from had completely vanished as if they’d never been there in the first place.

The quiet night town returned to its previous state. It was as if everything that just happened was nothing but a waking dream. The surroundings had become so calm that it left one to think of it that way.

“It’s over, huh?”

“Yeah.”

As Suimei smiled at Hatsumi, she smiled back. Just with that, she felt like everything that was important to her had returned. Wondering how Felmenia and the others were faring, they turned to look. But for some reason, they were all making a loud fuss. Just what had happened? As they ran over with a sense of unease, Hatsumi could see Suimei suddenly gaze off in the direction Clarissa and the others had fled with a severe expression. And before Hatsumi could call out to him...

“Ars Magna Raimundi... No, that magicka was—”

Suimei's mutter echoed into the dark night sky.



Because their hero had been targeted, the Alliance was busy cleaning up the aftermath. But because they'd predicted that much, most of the chaos was limited to the riot caused by the Anti-Goddess cult.

Speaking of, not a single one of its members was apprehended after the incident. After Clarissa and the others disappeared, the cult members also seemed to have disappeared back into the alleyways and the shadows of buildings where they had come from.

To the Alliance, such a disturbance was completely unprecedented, but it had been particularly trying for Suimei and the others. Naturally, the reason for that was because their opponents had been Clarissa and Jillbert.

Just a few days ago, they'd had a friendly exchange with both women. They had only known them for a short time, but Suimei owed them both a great deal. Lefille even considered Jillbert a close friend. They all had strong emotions about what had happened. It seemed a cruel twist of fate. It wasn't like Suimei and the others didn't understand the world could be harsh, but being betrayed like that was never easy.

And so, several days after their battle with Clarissa's group, Suimei, Felmenia, and Liliana were visiting Hatsumi's room in Miazen's palace to bid her farewell.

Selphy was also there, but having come to an understanding about Hatsumi's relationship with her new friends, she took the guards that were present with her as she left. She was likely being tactful in case they were going to talk about things that they didn't want others to hear.

After everyone settled into chairs, what awaited Suimei was an incessant trickle of dissatisfied complaints from Hatsumi. Asking about why he kept silent about being a magician, she frankly showed her discontent as she grumbled about how he never told her what he was up to. This lasted quite a while, leaving Suimei feeling rather defeated.

Since her memories returned, a great deal of stress came with them. And after taking a short rest, she frankly cut right back into complaining, but Felmenia stepped in to stop her with a forced

smile.

“U-Um, Hatsumi-dono? How about you leave running Suimei-dono into the ground at that?”

“What? I’m only halfway through my list.”

“All that... was only half... you say?”

Hearing her talk like she hadn’t unleashed her true fury yet, Liliana shuddered. Meanwhile, Suimei had already hit his breaking point. He was making an expression like Munch’s *The Scream* as he apologized nonstop.

“Everything is my fault, so please let me off around here...”

“I suppose. It’s also true that you couldn’t help some of it, so I’ll let you get off with just this much today.”

It seemed that she’d gotten the bare minimum off her chest for now. As the atmosphere in the room calmed down, Suimei tried talking to her again.

“...So, how are you Hatsumi? Do you feel better after regaining your memories?”

“Mm. Well, I’ve still got the memories from when I had amnesia, so it feels a little weird altogether, but I’ve got a better grip of the situation I’m in now.”

Part of the reason she could speak so calmly on the subject now was because she knew there was a possibility she could return home. That alone cured a great deal of her anxiety.

“Hatsumi, since you’ve gotten your memories back, I’ll ask you one more time... Do you want to come along with us?”

“No... I still can’t do that. I said it last time, but I jumped into this fight on my own. I can’t quit now.”

“Even if nothing can be done?”

“Suimei, you said it yourself a little while back, didn’t you? If the instructor saw me as I was, I would be punished. If I ran away for fear of my own safety, my dad would kill me.”

Hatsumi smiled as she talked. She had no misgivings about this. It was precisely because she regained her memories that she was able to follow through on her beliefs with such conviction. As long as she decided to follow the path she was on, there was no need for hesitation in walking forward.

“I see. I figured you’d say that.”

“You’re not going to bring me along by force?”

“I’ll respect your decision. Besides, I think I’ll be able to bring you back good news soon.”

“Have you figured something?!”

“I might be on the verge of a breakthrough. For now, I need to go back to my base in the Empire, organize the information I gained here, and start on trials for the spell... If that damn Eanru hadn’t blown away the ruins, I would have been able to solve it all while I was in the Alliance, though.”

“I see...”

Hearing that it would still take time, a slight amount of disappointment showed on Hatsumi’s face. The same would probably be true for Reiji and Mizuki.

“I know you probably don’t have any intent on returning until the demons in the northern Alliance territories are defeated, but... Well, if the spell is completed, it should be fine to visit home for a bit, right?”

“Yeah, I’m sure everyone is worried. Also...”

“Also?”

She made a stern expression like there was something else serious that needed to be considered. Suimei immediately asked her about it, but she answered as if it should have been completely obvious.

“Attendance records, you know. Attendance records. We haven’t been going to school, right?”

“If that’s all, I’ll take care of it somehow when we get back.”

“How?”

“Heh... I’m a magician, you know?”

As he implied that he would make it work out skillfully, Hatsumi frankly made an unpleasant expression.

“Ugh, you’re the worst... You’re totally planning on using magicka to slide by. Ugggh...”

“What? You want to repeat the year? I don’t really care either way, you know...”

“H-Hmm... that would also be bad, wouldn’t it?”

“Then it’s fine, isn’t it?”

As Hatsumi looked at him like he should be ashamed, Suimei closed up the conversation with a quip. Felmenia was the next to raise a question.

“It seems that things have been decided with regards to your return, but, Hatsumi-dono, will you be alright concerning those who are targeting you?”

“You mean that nun’s group?”

“Yes. As long as they claim to need the hero, I am sure there is a possibility that they will attack again. That being the case...”

What would she do? Really, as long as she couldn't run away to her own world, it was a danger that would exist. They could attack anywhere at any time. Echoing Felmenia's concerns, Suimei spoke up.

“Hatsumi, honestly speaking, what do you think?”

“It'll be difficult. This time we somehow got through because you and the others were there, but with that kind of ability... A swordsman would need to be about as strong as dad to compete against them.”

“Sounds about right, yeah...”

Suimei recalled the fight from the other day. From what he witnessed of Clarissa and Jillbert's abilities, Lefille, Felmenia, and Hatsumi were all overpowered in battle. The hero's power was an unknown factor, but on top of Clarissa and Jillbert, they had Eanru in the woodwork somewhere. Then there was the mirage man who Suimei thought was responsible for sending him to the spirit world.

If they all came at once, it was difficult to imagine that even a hero could win against them. However, Hatsumi seemed to have something else in mind...

“I can't win, but I think I'll be able to run away. I have my memories back, after all.”

Her expression showed a level of confidence that hadn't been there before. Certainly, now that her memories had returned, Hatsumi was stronger than she was without them. Clarissa and Jillbert were both skilled, but if she devoted herself to running away, she should be able to escape them without trouble. The magician on their side, however, was a different matter. Suimei was unable to say unconditionally that it would be possible to escape him.

“I'll complete the spell to return back home as fast as I can. If I do, we could use it for refuge if things get bad.”

“I kind of hate just running away, though...”

“What are we gonna do? That guy's stupid strong.”

“Mm... I don't know much about magicians, but if you say so, then I believe you.”

After seeing him fight Eanru, Hatsumi recognized Suimei's strength.

Before long, their conversation came to an end, and they parted

ways with brief farewells. Suimei and the others left Hatsumi's room, but Felmenia shortly turned to him.

"Now that I think about it, Hatsumi-dono isn't seeing you off?"

"Nah. I was always leaving home to head off somewhere, so she got out of the habit of walking with me."

"When you say it like that, it sounds like you were living together."

Felmenia seemed to have fallen into ill spirits as she looked at Suimei with a reproachful gaze.

"What are you pouting for? We're cousins and our houses were right next to each other. We were just like family should be. Besides, don't I live together with you right now?"

"Huh? Ah, that is true, but..."

In a complete one-eighty from her pouting, Felmenia was now broadly grinning in a happy manner.

"Besides, Lefille and Liliana also live with us too."

"Yup."

As Suimei declared that they all lived under the same roof, he didn't really seem to pay any mind to Liliana nodding alongside him. To him, he probably only saw the girls as companions and roommates. He was probably conscious that he was getting along on better terms with all of them, but because each of them had their own reasons—Felmenia had been sent by king Almadious and Lefille had her curse to consider—the late-blooming Suimei who had no experience with love was unable to properly grasp their affection.

"Felmenia Stingray, this is the beginning. It all starts here. You only started learning magicka, and you promised to go visit another world. There are still plenty of chances to get closer. Plenty!"

Felmenia turned her back on them and began mumbling to herself in encouragement. Liliana then tugged on Suimei's sleeve.

"What's up?"

"About that mage... with the large build... from before. Is it true... that if you properly fought him... you wouldn't win?"

"Probably. With a magician of that level, it would be quite difficult."

"Of that level...?"

"Yeah. It's probable that the magicka system he used is quite ancient, and therefore troublesome... In short, his techniques are outrageous."

Hearing Suimei's turn of phrase, Felmenia and Liliana both tilted their heads to the side.

"Suimei-dono, you just said it was ancient, but what does that mean?"

"Exactly as it sounds. It would be an old magicka system from my world. He's probably someone who is somehow related to my world."

There was enough evidence to suggest that— No, there really was no other explanation that he could think of. The savage names that Romeon used, the totemism that Clarissa used, and that magicka the mirage man used at the end. There was no mistaking their sect had some kind of entanglement with his own world.

"There is also Hatsumi-dono's case, so I am not really surprised after all this..."

"It's just getting to be a bigger and bigger pain..."

After his small preface, Suimei went on to answer their suspicions.

"To break through that magicka, I need to go back to my world at least once no matter what. I need to be taught by a magician who knows that spell to find out just what its origins are. Until then, there's probably nothing that I can do."

Hearing Suimei's reply, Felmenia and Liliana both looked quite concerned. Suimei then offered some conjecture.

"It's only maybe... And this is completely subjective, but what he used was a composite concept. Using two or three concepts that are in no way similar, I think he created something that mixed them all together."

"Mixing together concepts and c-creating a new one?!"

"Yeah."

Felmenia raised her voice in surprise. Both she and Liliana looked as if this was incredibly difficult to grasp.

"That kind of thing... is it something that can... be gathered and given form?"

"Because they're mixed, I think it can be given form. It's the same as anything else. For example, let's see..."

"For example?"

"A hoe carries the concept of 'plowing the earth.' It's a concept understood by the symbol of an iron bar fastened to a pole. But by fastening another tool to that, a new symbol is made that carries with it a new concept..."

It was something like a crest. As Suimei spoke, he looked to his left and right, and the two girls still looked quite stumped. But that was only natural. Accepting what he was talking about was like denying pragmatism in the world of magicka; it would be a breakthrough in the immutable laws of magicka. Even if one did not know that, it was still something that could not be easily understood.

“Aaah, sorry. Even though I don’t really get it myself, I was a bit hasty in trying to explain it. Just forget what I said.”

As Suimei tossed that subject aside, Felmenia suddenly asked him something else.

“Are there many magicians in Suimei-dono’s world who use that magicka system?”

“No. That’s also the first time I saw it. I think there should only be a couple people who use it, though.”

“Even though there are that few, you still know them?”

“I’ve got about three guesses. The magicians who used that magicka would have been active during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”

“Meaning?”

“They’ve all lived about five hundred years.”

“Five...?! Are they elves?”

“Nope, humans. Or, it would be better to say they were humans. They stopped being human long ago, after all.”

“Stopped being human...? That’s...”

“They’re all monsters, you hear? Monsters.”

“Monsters that surpass you?”

“Just for the record, I’m basically a baby chick compared to them. Well, at that level, pretty much every living being in the world would just be a baby chick compared to you...”

The true abilities of such magicians could be completely grasped just by ranking them. The reason he estimated himself lowly compared to them was because of that. If one was not at their actual level, even as a high-ranking magician, there was hardly a comparison. They were mere babes.

“...”

As Suimei fell silent, he recalled an incident from quite some time ago. It was an unusual occasion where Nestahaim settled a dispute between fellow magicians. Along with the magicka they were firing, he let out a single word and reduced them all into

infants in an instant. To be able to make his targets abide by his will without even using a spell... It was a technique completely beyond Suimei.

“Suimei... that phenomenon... Was it also that magician?”

That phenomenon—in other words those things that attacked them at the end.

“Nope. That was caused by something else. They aren’t things that people bring about intentionally.”

“The name... if I remember right...”

“Twilight syndrome.”

He never actually formally explained this to Liliana. However, Felmenia had seen it once before.

“Suimei-dono, why did they appear then? When I last asked you, you said that it was something that did not occur in this world.”

“That’s what I thought. In reality, the natural power in the world is strong, so it shouldn’t be at the stage where twilight syndrome occurs.”

“But if it occurred at that time despite that, it means...”

“Just what *does* it mean, I wonder...”

Suimei began scratching the back of his head awkwardly. While he was acting a bit exaggeratedly, he did seem to be actually thinking about it.

“Well, if I had to guess... What those guys are up to, taking that event into account, they’re moving to hasten the end of the world... Wouldn’t that be about right?”

Hearing that, Liliana cocked her head to the side.

“End... the world? But all they did... was swoop in and attack, right?”

“That’s true, but two sayings come to mind. ‘Important matters happen more often than trivial ones,’ and ‘nature does not make great strides.’ Everything in nature proceeds gradually; there are no sudden leaps forward. Thinking of it that way, the reason they attacked was... In short, their goal was to abduct the hero, but it’s also possible one important matter that comes out of this is that they are hastening the possibility of the end of the world by doing so.”

Clarissa and the others had a goal in abducting heroes, that much was clear. It was unknown whether it had anything to do with the demise of the world, but something had brought about the

twilight syndrome incident.

“I can’t completely throw out the possibility that it was a complete coincidence... But that kind of thing is out of my area of expertise. I’m not one of the denizens of twilight, so I don’t really know.”

With that, Suimei brought the conversation to an end and brought up another of his worries.

“All that’s left... is Lefi, huh?”

“Lefille...?”

Suimei nodded bitterly as he recalled Lefille’s current condition.

“She’s... the same as always... no?”

“She’s probably dwelling on her defeat. It doesn’t show normally, but I bet she’s frustrated.”

It affected her quite deeply that she was forced to taste defeat at Clarissa’s hands. Since then, Suimei caught glimpses of her acting somewhat impatient.

“Well, it’s not only that.”

“It’s that, right?”

“So it is.”

Thinking about what happened to Lefille’s body alongside her defeat, the three of them each hung their heads down heavily.



While Suimei and the others were in anguish, Lefille was taking action elsewhere, and was in the office of the Twilight Pavilion’s guild master, but...

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

AaaaaaaaHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!

“Rumeya-dono, please don’t laugh! This isn’t something to laugh about!”

“But, but... You know?! If you, if you show me something like that... I’ll, I’ll... Hah! HAHAHAHAHA, HAAAAA!”

Rumeya was rolling around on the guild office floor, her tails whipping about as she laughed with all her might. It sounded like she might choke and die as she gasped and wheezed for air. Meanwhile, sitting on the sofa in front of her was the one who was laying bare her innocent anger—Lefille, who had once more become tiny.

“There’s nothing I can do! It’s not like I became like this

because I wanted to..."

"Aaah, aaaah... My stomach hurts. This is the best laugh I've had all year."

Seeing that she was still unable to stop laughing, Lefille was on the verge of tears as she scowled bitterly at Rumeysa. However, her expression was just far too cute and didn't carry a hint of dignity. After finally calming down from her fit of laughter, Rumeysa resealed herself on the sofa.

"No, but really... To think that your body becomes smaller when you use too much of the spirits' power. This never happened to Aldephize. Well, it just shows how large a portion of Lefi's body the spirits occupy is all... Pfft!"

Clamping her hand over her mouth, Rumeysa tried to stop herself from breaking out into laughter once more. However, she was at her limits, and her cheeks began to swell out as her mouth filled with air and a small laugh leaked out. On the other hand, Lefille could only let out an exasperated sigh.

"Please put a stop to that already. Suimei-kun and the others will be coming over to say their farewells soon."

"Is that so? Hmph... Then before they get here, there's something I wanted to talk with you about."

She held her pipe close as her expression turned serious. Seeing that, Lefille naturally responded in kind.

"Rumeysa-dono, what is it that you wanted to talk about?"

After puffing at her pipe, Rumeysa pointed a sharp gaze at Lefille which felt like it was piercing right through her.

"...You lost, right, Lefi?"

"That's..."

"Did you think I wouldn't know just 'cause you didn't mention it? I'd rather you not take me so lightly."

As if she had seen the fight herself, Rumeysa's words were filled with conviction. Having been seen through completely, Lefille honestly nodded back to her.

"Lefi, do you know the reason you lost?"

"...Because my power couldn't earnestly reach them."

"That's true, but... Are you aware of the other reason?"

Hearing her words, Lefille's heart jumped in place. However...

"No, it's just that my skills are still too raw. There is no other reason for defeat."

Lefille frowned as she denied there being any other reason. She

didn't want to accept it. If she acknowledged it, she felt like a part of what had been supporting her would crumble to pieces. As Rumeya looked at her obstinate expression, she simply smiled and sighed. This seemed to irritate Lefille, as she took on an unexpectedly critical tone with her.

"Do you think that there is something else, Rumeya-dono?"

"It would be simple for me to say it here, but... There's a parental side of me that thinks it would be better for you to find out yourself and accept it. There would be no benefit to you if I were too meddlesome after all. Heh, what to do with you...?"

As Rumeya muttered in a troubled manner, she puffed out the smoke from her pipe towards the ceiling and tapped the ashes out of her pipe into an ashtray. And then, perhaps having found her answer...

"That's it. Well, you've got that boy and your reliable companions after all, so there's no need to rush it. Along the way, it will do you good to just look at the fights you've had up until now. If you end up losing despite that... Come back and see me again. I'll strictly reforge you when you do."

"...Understood."

"Mm. In short, don't get too much into a fighting mood. But that's oh-so hard, especially when you're young..."

As she trailed off quietly, she must have been thinking of her own experiences. With a faraway look, Rumeya gazed out the window. After silently finishing her pipe, she suddenly smiled and called out to Lefille.

"Lefi, come here for a bit."

"What's the matter?"

"Let me pet you."

"NO WAY!"

Rumeya was waving her hand up and down trying to appeal to Lefille for a good petting as Lefille obstinately refused her. Her hat that was far too big for her body fell over her eyes and she curled up into a ball on the sofa.

"Waah! You've become the perfect size to be petted, so isn't it fine?!"

"It isn't! Where can you find someone who would be glad to be petted in this kind of circumstance?!"

Saying that, Lefille abruptly turned the other way as Rumeya broadly grinned.

“Even if you say you hate it, I’m just going to pet you forcefully.”

The moment those words reached Lefille’s ears, Rumeya’s figure on the sofa became nothing but an after image. She’d vanished. And then immediately after that, Lefille’s hat was stolen from her with great force.

“Wawawawawawah! Rumeya-dono?!”

“I got youuu!”

“Augh...”

As she was pinned down by something soft and delightful, Lefille learned of absolute humiliation. As she was, with her abilities in this state, Lefille had no chance of escaping. And after Rumeya teased her for a while, her fox ears suddenly began twitching.

“Oops, looks like they’re here. Well, though it’ll be meager, shall we throw a farewell party?”

“Very well...”

Epilogue I

Elliot Austin had just arrived in the western territory of the kingdom of Astel—in Kurant City, to be precise. While visiting the area at the request of the Church of Salvation, he was also en route to the country of Thoria, which lay to the north of Astel. But right here and now in Kurant City, he stood before a towering mansion under the evening sky. In the light of the mana lamps placed outside, he once more looked at the letter that had been passed to him that afternoon.

“My goodness. I get an invitation as soon as I arrive...”

He let out a long sigh, reflecting on how hectic it was to be a hero. Promptly after he arrived, as though he was expected, he’d received an invitation from the lord of the mansion in front of him.

That lord was Lucas de Hadorious, the ruler of Kurant City and an important noble who held great influence in Astel. Elliot had a formal meeting with him set up by the Church of Salvation for the next day, but preempting that, Hadorious had set up a meeting of his own. Elliot had no reason to refuse, so after leaving Christa behind at their lodgings at the church, he’d come to visit the mansion.

Upon introducing himself to the gate guards and flashing the letter he’d received, Elliot was immediately shown inside. As he passed through the door to the private room where Hadorious was seated, he took a moment to appreciate how dimly lit it was. The only thing serving as a light source was the moonlight coming in from the window. The man who’d summoned him was sitting at his desk, exuding a needless intensity from his eyes without so much as saying a word. It was overwhelming, even compared to the aura Graziella gave off.

Elliot was quite taken aback by it, but trying to make sure that it didn’t show on the surface, he stepped forward and stood before the duke. He was definitely pressuring Elliot, but Hadorious simply pretended like he didn’t realize that and called out to Elliot.

“The hero of El Meide, Elliot-dono... I thank you for accepting

my sudden summons. How are you doing this evening?"

"Up until now everything was just normal, but after coming to your estate, I feel like I'm suddenly between a rock and a hard place."

"I'm sure you do."

Hearing Elliot's sarcastic tone, Hadorious responded with a snort. This man seemed to keep his wariness concealed.

As I thought, this man is aware...

Unlike the emperor of Nelferia who always and without exception had an intimidating air about him, Hadorious's intensity seemed to be used with a sense of purpose. It was like his stone gaze was some sort of test, and it went without question that the one being tested would surely feel the pressure. While Elliot was nursing such doubts, he kept up his facade and questioned Hadorious.

"Are you not going to turn on the lights?"

"I simply thought it would be more refined to sit under the moonlight. If you do not mind, then I would like to leave it as such."

Elliot internally questioned Hadorious's mysterious subtleties, but outwardly gave a nod in response.

"And so, what business do you have with me today?"

"As the lord of this town, I thought it was necessary to greet you."

"If it was a greeting you were after, you could have waited until tomorrow. Besides, calling this a greeting is pure pretense at this point."

"Regarding that, I recall Astel's hero saying something similar."

There, a faint smile surfaced on Hadorious's lips. Seeing this, Elliot let just a fraction of his displeasure show as he continued.

"If that is all you have to say, then I will take my leave."

"Now, now, don't be so hasty. I have one more matter to discuss with you. The reason I called you here today, bastard, was because I wanted to have a talk with you one on one."

"Bast— Just what is it?"

Elliot choked back his complaint at the sudden discourtesy and instead urged the conversation forward. Hadorious then folded his hands together atop his desk.

"I'd like to hear your damned opinion on something."

"My opinion? My opinion on what, exactly? Could it be that

you think I'm going to cause some kind of harm to this country?"

"No, I believe no such thing. You see, I simply want to know why it is you wish to save this world."

To Elliot, this seemed like nothing more than foolish, pompous whimsy—the kind typical of nobles. He was speaking like he was toying with Elliot, but regardless, Elliot replied honestly.

"It is not like I want to save the world itself, per se. I am simply saving the people who wish to be saved, and as a result, the world is also being saved. It is not something that I give much thought."

"..."

"Does that answer not please you?"

To Hadorious, it must have sounded unconvincing. As Elliot was thinking that, Hadorious shook his head.

"Let me rephrase: why do you want to defeat the demons, bastard?"

"...Just as I said before, to save the people who want to be saved."

"I see. That is quite noble of you."

"As I suspected, this answer does not satisfy you, does it?"

"Indeed, it is strange."

Faced with the continuous stream of indirect replies mixed with sarcasm, Elliot's tone was starting to betray his irritation.

"I believe that standing up to fight for the sake of others is only natural."

"However, it does not have anything to do with you personally, does it? The crisis of this world, the people here... You're an unrelated third party."

"That is certainly true, but..."

He had a point there, but Elliot had his pride. In his world, he was a brave and well-known warrior. He had built up his own sense of pride and established his own set of values. He would never act only to benefit his own well-being. It was true he wasn't from this world, but he'd become personally invested in it and its people. He couldn't just bluntly refuse them. It seemed that Hadorious had also picked up on his train of thought...

"So how does this all necessitate defeating the demons? Even without fighting them, can't you still save the people of this world?"

"I am fighting the demons because it was requested of me, and I have the power to do so. That is why I complied."

"I see. You are the same as the others in that regard, then."

“...?”

Elliot was unable to grasp Hadorious’s true motives behind his mysterious phrasing, and was racking his brain for a suitable reply.

“You have a better understanding than that man, it must be said. At least in regards as to how the world actually works.”

“...?”

“Based on your reply to my earlier question, I will ask you one more. You have resolved yourself to fight the demons, but why do you really think that is? To come to this world and act as a hero to save it... Do you not find it strange that you never once doubted what you were doing?”

“Whether I found it strange or not, my will to fight was nothing other than my own.”

Fighting the demons was something he had decided to do himself. Certainly, the fact that his motivation seemed bottomless was odd, even to Elliot himself, but...

“That is not what I meant, bastard. You are— No, it’s not just you. Every single one of you heroes are being manipulated.”

“Manipulated? By who?”

“The Goddess. The fact that you have all decided to fight with such conviction in this world is no coincidence. It was all influenced by the Goddess and her plans.”

“...”

Hearing Hadorious’s bold declaration, Elliot kept his mouth shut and thought it over. Just where exactly was he going with this? He’d started asking about why Elliot was fighting, and had now moved on to the Goddess... Elliot couldn’t see the end goal of this conversation. To him, it all seemed like some kind of joke. But for some reason, he was unable to just laugh it off.

“And why does that matter to you? We heroes received divine protection from the Goddess, so surely it’s reasonable to assume that there could be some other kind of intervention involved. Besides, I do not think it’s a particularly bad thing in this case if it’s for the sake of saving people.”

“It is just as you say, bastard. However, what if it wasn’t actually for the sake of the people? If the heroes’ existence was only to satisfy the Goddess’s selfish desires, what would you think about it then?”

“Let me riddle you this. Because the nature of divinity is so vast and out of our realm of understanding, it is foolish to assume that

gods possess the same mundane motivations that humans do. I do not believe that anything truly divine is capable of greed.”

So he declared. But as Elliot spoke, beads of sweat began forming on his forehead. He’d realized something that he didn’t want to, and it was immediately beginning to weigh on him. The pressure of it, much like Hadorious’s gaze, was relentless.

“If you’re so knowledgeable about the beings known as gods, then you should have also already thought about this. Certainly, gods do not possess a sense of greed. But just what are these so-called gods, really? What exactly do they do?”

As Elliot gulped hard, he contemplated Hadorious’s questions, and in doing so, recalled a conversation he’d previously had with Suimei. The talk he was currently having with Hadorious wasn’t too different. Suimei too had asked him his opinion on the gods, but because Elliot mistook him for a person of this world, he hadn’t investigated it any further. If he had, he likely would have arrived at the conclusion he was just about to...

“Well, Elliot-dono?”

“...For the sake of amassing their own power, they are existences that exert their authority.”

“And do you think that such existences would allow individuals that they’ve invested their power in to act freely? You know deep in your heart that you are dancing to the Goddess’s tune, correct?”

He was right. Elliot’s actions may not have truly been his own will. It was reasonable to wonder if the reason he so thoroughly believed that he had to fight the demons no matter what was truly because something was working behind the scenes to plant that suggestion in his head.

“But... is that wrong?”

“Hmm?”

“Certainly, it may not be my own will. Our fight may be the result of the Goddess’s despotism. However, because of that, people will be saved. In that case, I do not think it is particularly a bad thing. You could even say it’s necessary. After all, it is the will of the gods.”

“To say you’re simply doing what’s necessary is to deny your own agency in your destiny. Fragile lives are lost or trampled every day because of ‘the will of the gods.’ Would you still say that’s necessary, bastard?”

“What are you referring to?”

But when Elliot asked that, Hadorious answered his question with another question.

“Allow me to ask you this first: What kind of place was your world? Was it a world where people strived to make life better? Aren’t those efforts the foundation upon which your world was built?”

“What are you saying? Isn’t that obvi—”

Indeed, to Elliot, it was obvious that people always strove for a better life. As long as people lived, they would push for development and the betterment of themselves and society. However, from the way Hadorious was speaking, it sounded like he was skeptical of something...

It was then that Elliot realized it. Hadorious’s questions had made him realize the mechanism that drove this world.

“It couldn’t be... This world...”

The moment he asked for confirmation, the door to the office opened and several soldiers appeared. As they fell into line, Elliot glanced at them and questioned Hadorious.

“What is the meaning of this?”

“Our conversation is over for now. I’ll be moving on to testing you.”

“If it is something violent, then I will lodge a complaint with the Church of Salvation.”

“That’ll only be if you manage to leave here, no?”

“Do you really think they’ll be able to stop me?”

Hadorious’s words were arrogant and daring, but the only forces he’d summoned were mere soldiers. Even if they attacked together, they would be no match for Elliot who was under the Goddess’s divine protection. But as Elliot was thinking this, Hadorious stood up from his desk.

“I’ll be your opponent, bastard.”

“For the esteemed duke to step forward himself... Will it not be troublesome if you’re injured fighting a hero?”

“First, let’s see you try.”

Ignoring Elliot’s sarcasm, Hadorious provoked him. It was difficult to have a spat within a lord’s manor, but judging that nothing would be accomplished through diplomacy now, Elliot drew his sword and attacked. But he was stopped in his tracks by Hadorious’s sword before he realized that he’d even drawn it.

“Wha?!”

“Hah... As I thought, you jump to action differently from the others.”

“You stopped my sword... with one hand?”

Elliot had no intention of actually hitting Hadorious. He fully planned on stopping just shy of striking him to make a point. The speed of his sword was such that no human should have been able to see it coming, so it was a tremendous shock that Hadorious had been able to block it—wielding his blade single-handedly, no less.

“Hero, surely you do not intend to say that this is all you’ve got... You also held back when you fought the third imperial princess of the Empire, did you not?”

“...How do you know that?”

“Let’s just say I have my ways of finding things out.”

Elliot put his strength into his sword, but the resistance he felt made him leap backward. He then returned his sword to its sheath.

He couldn’t understand this man. He had no idea what he was thinking. At this rate, anything could happen. He could be captured, even killed... Nothing seemed impossible at this point.

Coming to that conclusion, Elliot made his resolve. What he needed to do right now was to use all his strength to make an escape. Still unarmed, Elliot rolled up his right sleeve. When he did, a silver gauntlet appeared on his forearm. He then gave his final warning.

“...If I get serious, it will come at no small material cost to this mansion, you understand.”

“That is only if you are able to use your power well.”

“Allow me to show you just what I can do.”

Electricity coiled around Elliot’s arm. It lashed out, smashing and destroying the furnishings it touched. But even so, he was still holding it back. And it seemed Hadorious saw through even that.

“A great power, I see... This is why you could not use it in the middle of the city.”

“Naturally. Because of the divine protection from the hero summoning, my power is exceptionally strong. If I used this in the middle of a city, it would be a bother to innocent civilians.”

Just as Elliot was about to throw himself at Hadorious...

“If you have that much power, then it is more than enough.”

“More than enough...?”

“I am talking about the divine protection. If it is that well adapted to your body, then the necessary portion has likely been

filled.”

“I do not know what you are talking about, but I am not about to stand down at this point.”

“Do as you please. After all, it is not my role to stop you.”

Immediately after Hadorious’s veiled threat, a shock ran through Elliot’s nape.

“Wh... What...?”

Elliot was puzzled. The sudden blow left his consciousness hazy, and he used all his strength to focus on his senses. The soldiers behind him had showed no signs of moving, but...

“As one would expect of the Lonely Shadow. To think even this hero was unable to sense you. Your title isn’t just for show, I see.”

A name he had heard before reached Elliot’s ears. When he was in the Empire, the people from the army spoke fearfully of the Lonely Shadow, a man with swept-back black hair accentuated with a splash of gray. He had reddish-brown eyes and a rigid face. His presence could meld into any shadow. He was the Empire’s greatest swordsman and assassin.

“R-Rogue Zandyke... Just when...”

“From the very beginning. It was wise to take note of the soldiers who came in, but to neglect the possibility that someone was lurking here from the start... It’s a mistake one would expect a hero to make.”

“Ugh...”

Unable to support his body anymore, Elliot fell to a knee while trembling. While vaguely listening to Rogue’s warning, Elliot’s consciousness gradually sank into a muddy darkness. After Rogue confirmed that he was out cold, he carried Elliot over to the sofa and laid him down. He then turned to Hadorious.

“...Could you not have done it yourself?”

“It was better for you to. The hero’s power is not something that can be underestimated.”

“And who was the one who took that power head-on?” Rogue replied in a taciturn manner.

His attitude was insolent, but it seemed there was something of an understanding between him and Hadorious. The soldiers in the room certainly said nothing of it. After a moment’s pause, Hadorious raised a different matter.

“However, was that alright? Becoming a Universal Apostle like us?”

"A foolish question. I have sworn my sword to Gottfried-dono. Isn't the same true for you?"

"No."

"Explain."

"My sword is already dedicated to another. I cannot lie about that. Of course, I have not forgotten my great admiration for that man."

Hadorious was clearly thinking of someone. Rogue felt like he could nearly see a hallucination in the direction his far-off gaze was staring.

"Hadorious-dono, there is one thing that I must pass on to you."

"Let's hear it."

"The demons have moved. They've already plunged into Thoria and are on their way to the Empire."

"I see. As expected, they moved precisely as he predicted."

As Hadorious sighed, Rogue raised a doubt of his own. Something that had been bothering him.

"Isn't this different from the original plan? The invasion of the demons in Astel and the departure of Reiji-dono to the self-governed state. The failure to capture the Alliance's hero. There have been deviations that cannot be ignored."

"Regarding that, adjustments are being made on each occasion. As such, there's no real problem. The original plan was to gather all of the heroes beforehand, but it seems that has changed a little."

"What do you mean? In that case, the Empire will have to stand and fight against the demons without a hero and end up losing, right?"

"No, that will not happen."

"Hmm... Then the Alliance's hero will go to the Empire? Or will we have this hero take care of the demon subjugation ahead of schedule?"

Rogue gave Elliot a sidelong glance, but Hadorious shook his head.

"No, that duty will fall on Astel's hero."

"But are Reiji-dono's abilities not insufficient? A fight against an army of demons would likely be too heavy a responsibility for him. After the incident in the Empire, its prominent nobles have decreased in number. If it's not Elliot-dono, then I don't think things will balance back out properly."

"Regarding the hero of Astel's abilities, it is not a matter to be

concerned over. We will simply play our hand so that he can win. Besides, Hero Reiji is currently quite famous. Because he was made out as the one who defeated ten thousand demons in Astel, his reputation exceeds Hero Elliot's."

"But the Alliance's hero has also defeated a demon general, correct?"

"The Alliance's Hero Hatsumi has just ended a large battle with the demons in a draw. She was also unable to quell the uproar in Miazen. That will affect her reputation. Meanwhile, Hero Reiji has inherited a legendary weapon from the self-governed state and driven back the demon general who attacked him for it. If he drives back the demons from the Empire on top of that..."

"Certainly, Reiji-dono would be known as the strongest hero."

Currently, Reiji's apparent achievements as a hero had indeed surpassed Elliot's. In terms of actual ability, he was somewhat lacking, but to the people who blindly believed in the tales of heroes, none of that mattered. Seeing that Rogue was convinced, Hadorious glanced over at Elliot.

"All that matters is the faith of the populace. Certainly, it is also important for a hero to have the power to drive back the demons, but that is a secondary concern. Currently, the Alliance's hero is the strongest of all, but the divine protection she received is inferior. However, since Hero Reiji has been steadily distinguishing himself, the Goddess must also have her eye on him. Naturally, we must put the other heroes to use as well."

Pausing for a moment there, Hadorious looked up at the moon through the window.

"Let us make sure that Hero Reiji gains the utmost fame that he can so that he receives the Goddess's favor and becomes a peerless hero."

To set him up in such a high position, hardship would be completely unavoidable. After all, if he could not prove himself, it would only come back to bite him once he was elevated. Rogue muttered lightly to himself out of pity for Reiji.

Epilogue II

After Suimei's party returned to the Nelferian Empire from the Saadias Alliance, they headed back to the house they used as a base. It was just as they'd left it. The alabaster that Suimei had heavily plastered on the walls of the surrounding buildings was still a nice, pure white. The characteristic dankness of such backstreet neighborhoods was nowhere to be found in this place, which radiated an aura of cheer and brightness. With the sunlight shining down into it from overhead, it was almost like a park.

Looking around, several of the cats that Suimei had made his temporary familiars were settled on top of the tables and chairs that had been left in the patio area. They were purring and relaxing as they lay spread out. Some were lazily scratching themselves, some were snoozing away, and some were sunning themselves up on the balcony.

"Kitties!"

The moment she saw all this, Liliana cast aside her parasol and made a beeline for the felines, her reddish-violet twintails bouncing through the air after her. Since she'd been away for a while, she needed a refresher session of quality time with some small, furry friends. Thinking back on it, Suimei remembered that Liliana had been somewhat reluctant to part with the cats when they left the Empire.

"Hug..."

"Meeow!"

After capturing several cats, Liliana pressed them against her cheeks all at once. Because Liliana had made friends with them back when they were temporary familiars of Suimei's, they didn't at all seem to mind her affection. The only one who seemed to think anything of it was the tiny Lefille. Stooping over to grab the parasol that Liliana had cast aside, Lefille scooped up a cat herself and began talking to it.

"I guess you guys aren't going to return to where you came from, huh?"

“Meow.”

Even as she continued to poke the cat’s cheek and question it, the only reply she received—of course—was meowing. She’d known that would happen, but still felt like she had to try. It was Liliana, who was next to her while gently petting as many cats as she could, that replied for them.

“It’s pretty here... and it’s easy to take an afternoon catnap... so they come around once in a while.”

“Cats love clean places, after all. So I suppose in their roaming around, they enjoy stopping by here to nap and relax.”

“Meow.”

The cats meowed as if to agree, and Liliana listened to them intently. It looked like she was having a conversation with them, but it was just a method Suimei had taught her to come to a mutual understanding with animals.

After the incident in the Empire had been resolved, the cats’ job was fulfilled. So in accordance with their contract (which had been cooperation in exchange for food and a place to sleep for a finite period of time), the magicka that partially enhanced their intelligence was dispelled. That returned them to being normal cats, and they all returned to their regular haunts. But there was no erasing the knowledge they’d gained of this place—which was indeed a wonderful place to take a catnap—so many of them returned quite frequently.

“At this rate, it’ll become a gathering spot for them at night, huh?”

“I imagine so, Suimei-dono. It is often said that cats like to gather.”

Felmenia seemed quite happy about it. She was also rather fond of cats, so the tranquil sight of so many of them together was like food for the soul.

“B-By the way, um...”

Felmenia then glanced back and forth between the cats and Suimei. She’d gone from seeming cheerful to embarrassed as she fidgeted restlessly.

“Hmm? Ah, the cats, right? Go on.”

“Yes!”

Her silver hair streaking behind her, Felmenia practically leaped towards Liliana and began petting the cats as well. Time passed like that peacefully for a while, but then Suimei and the

others heard a familiar voice from down the alley.

“Ah, they’re here!”

It was a young man’s voice—one Suimei knew particularly well, and one that was somewhat reassuring to hear. When Suimei turned around, he spied Reiji and his party, who should have been in the Saadias Alliance. Titania then called out to him with her usual composed expression.

“So you’ve returned?”

“Yeah, we just got back.”

As Suimei shrugged his shoulders, Felmenia came running up from behind him carrying a cat. She immediately fell to one knee and properly greeted Titania like a princess.

“Your Highness, it is wonderful to see you in good health.”

“White Flame-dono, it is also nice to see you in such good spirits. Do you like cats?”

“Huh? Um, well... yes...”

The sight of Felmenia courteously kneeling with a cat in her arms was too much for even the self-possessed Titania, who began giggling. After Felmenia replied in an embarrassed tone, she moved the conversation onward.

“Your Highness, if I remember correctly, was it not your plan to reassure the citizens of the self-governed state?”

“Indeed, we have just returned to the Empire this morning.”

“Actually, we got called back by that noble again,” Reiji announced, admitting the real reason for their return.

“That noble again, huh?”

“Mm...”

As Reiji replied with a grim expression, Suimei realized that the person in their group who was usually the loudest hadn’t made an appearance yet.

“So, where’s Mizuki? I haven’t seen her yet.”

“U-Um, Mizuki is...”

“What’s up?”

Suimei cocked his head to the side as he asked for the details, but Reiji awkwardly looked away. And just as he did...

“FUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

Suddenly, an excessively tense, high-energy laugh rang out from behind Reiji and the others. Hearing it, Suimei’s heart sank.

“Say, Reiji... Why is it I’m getting such a terrible feeling about that laugh?”

“Don’t make me say it...”

As Reiji answered him in a tired voice, Mizuki arrived on the scene—her odd eye shining gold.

“It has been a while, Dark Crimson Hider whose darkness is deeper than that of the universe I inhabit! Oh, my eternal rival!”

“Ahhh... I see.”

Just hearing what Mizuki said, Suimei seemed to figure out what was going on. Looking at Reiji and Titania, he could tell that the two of them were at their wits’ end. As Mizuki strode over to him confidently, Suimei beheld her with a complex expression.

“You know, Mizuki... didn’t you stop doing that?”

“What are you talking about? Besides, I am not Mizuki. I am a unique existence between all heaven and earth, the Holy King of the Heavens, Io Kuzami.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... None of that’s real.”

As Suimei gave an apathetic response, Felmenia looked at him bemusedly.

“Suimei-dono, just what is even going on here? I am having a hard time understanding.”

“Even if you ask me... Hey, Reiji, what’s up with this?”

Reiji then explained what had happened in the self-governed state. About how they’d attained the weapon left behind by a hero of old. About how a demon general had appeared. And about how Mizuki had ended up like this.

“I see... So she started acting like this after getting that weapon.”

“Mm. That’s why it’s my fault. If I’d properly protected her, then...”

Reiji’s expression was tense. He’d said he’d protect Mizuki from the very beginning, even before they’d left Astel. That things had turned out like this weighed heavily on him.

“Well, don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“Mizuki’s also responsible for saying she would go along. Besides, nothing will come out of brooding over it now. Spilled milk and all that. Also, if she suddenly got weird again, isn’t it possible she might just suddenly go back to being normal?”

His burden perhaps allayed by such optimistic words, Reiji’s expression lightened.

“You’re right.”

“Though I have to say, I’m pretty floored by this turn of events...”

“Yeah...”

Reiji looked at Mizuki for a moment with a complicated expression. He likely wanted to say that he wished this hadn’t happened. And he wasn’t the only one in his group who felt that way.

“Well, whatever. Let’s head inside for now. We actually just got back ourselves though, so I don’t have much to offer you in the way of hospitality.”

“You needn’t pay us any mind. We’re primarily here to exchange information, after all.”

Following up on Titania’s polite reply, Io Kuzami—previously known as Mizuki—took a haughty attitude.

“Hmph. Then let us go to your damned castle.”

“Mizuki, you wait out here for a bit.”

“I am Io Kuzami.”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it, Io Kuzami-san. Menia, get Lefi and Liliana and go inside with Reiji and the others.”

After waiting for everyone else to enter the house, Suimei turned to Io Kuzami.

“Now then... Well, so? You’re seriously not pretending here, right?”

“Do you still not believe me, bastard?”

“Just checking. Come here for a bit.”

“I refuse.”

“Of course... Actually, it’s faster for me to just get closer. Lend me your head.”

Looking like he was more than ready to pick a fight, Suimei drew closer. As he did, Io Kuzami put on a smile like she was toying with him.

“Did I not say that I refuse?”

“Can’t hear you.”

Promptly ignoring Io Kazumi, Suimei placed his hand on her head. He hadn’t been able to do anything for Hatsumi because she couldn’t remember who she was supposed to be, but in the case of a split personality, it was possible to return the original personality to dominance without any trauma. And so, despite feeling guilty about it, Suimei prepared to cast his magicka. But just as he did...

“Bastard, do you intend to tamper with this little girl’s head

again?"

"!"

Io Kuzami smirked like she knew exactly what Suimei was up to. Gripped with surprise, he took a step back. Io Kuzami then flashed another smirk—a much darker one.

"What's wrong? That's not really something to be so startled over, is it?"

"...What are you? And how the hell do you know that?"

Suimei questioned her with a severe expression. What he'd done was supposed to be his secret and his secret alone. How could a split personality that had just suddenly appeared possibly know about it? Doubt and suspicion began whirling around in his head. Meanwhile, Io Kuzami simply continued smirking.

"You're making quite a grim face, but am I wrong? It's something that happened before you bastards came to this world. Yes, this little girl had fallen in love with you, but you trampled on that love. Using your damned powers, you shifted her infatuation to a different target."

"...Yeah, that's right."

It was true. At first, Mizuki was seriously interested in Reiji. But while Suimei was helping her approach Reiji, she'd ended up falling in love with him instead. And just as Io Kuzami said, Suimei had used magicka to deflect those feelings onto someone else. Being confronted with this now, Suimei gave Io Kuzami a dubious look. His eyes asked her how she knew all that.

"It's a trifling matter, really. When I possessed this little girl, I simply had a little peek at her memories. Of course, I also had a look at those damn memories that you sealed away."

It was then that Suimei somehow came to a vague understanding of just who Io Kuzami really was.

"Answer me. What are you? What kind of spirit?"

"There's no need to be so angry. I have no intention of making any mischief. The reason that I am borrowing this little girl's body is simply because our interests coincided. Besides, you are unable to remove me, correct?"

"Don't underestimate a modern magician. We've been exorcising things like you for ages with all kinds of magicka."

"Enough. You might even be able to do so with me, but the burden on this little girl will be considerable. It may just break her, you understand?"

“...”

Suimei was unable to deny that. If what had possessed Mizuki was indeed a powerful being and he forcefully drove it out of her, it would come at a significant cost. And since he couldn't argue, Suimei simply scowled at Io Kuzami.

“What? Don't make such a frightening face. There's nothing to worry about. I have no intention of bringing any harm to this little girl, though she may yet go through some painful experiences.”

“Is that the truth?”

“I don't lie.”

That much he could be certain about. By their very nature, spirits did not lie. There were occasions that they avoided telling the truth or tricked people, but if a spirit wasn't the mischievous type, they could be taken at their word. So if this being guaranteed Mizuki's safety, Suimei had every reason to believe it. And so Suimei gave up on trying to drive whatever it was out by force. Io Kuzami then looked at him with a curious expression.

“If this little girl is so precious to you, then why do you keep her at a distance?”

“Shut up. I'm a magician, and Mizuki is a normal human. I have to draw a line to keep her safe.”

“I see.”

After a brief reply, Io Kuzami smirked once more.

“Also, don't mention any of this to the others. You hear me, bastard? This is a secret between the two of us.”

And with that, whatever had possessed Mizuki laughed with her mouth.

Afterword

It's been a while, everyone. This is Gamei Hitsuji.

The story this time around is the conclusion to the Saadias Alliance arc. Most of Suimei and company's battles are resolved there, and formidable enemies are appearing one after the other. Things are gradually getting more and more serious. Hang in there, Suimei-kun!

After all is said and done, the centerpiece of this volume was the battle with Eanru, wasn't it? It is quite a heated battle, the likes of which we haven't seen for a while!

And then, and then! There's more! In this volume, I wrote much more than I ever have up until now about Reiji-kun's story! It's finally come! Reiji's time to shine! Or really, Mizuki's! (Ha!) From now on, the portions where Reiji-kun becomes stronger and Mizuki's gag portions as Io Kuzami may just increase steadily! It would please me if you looked forward to not only just Suimei-kun's, but to their activities as well.

Allow me to thank everybody who helped safely bring volume 6 out into the world. To chief editor S-sama; illustrator himesuz-sama; designer Horiehideaki-sama; and the proofreading company Oraido-sama, I couldn't have done it without you.

-Gamei Hitsuji

Bonus Short Stories

A Request From Mary-chan

Suimei was in his room at Alto Schloss, the Society's headquarters in Germany, putting together the results of his magicka work at his desk when there came a rapping at the door. After knocking several times, his assistant Hydemary Alzbayne entered the room. When Suimei turned around and asked her if she needed something, she replied in her usual flat tone with zero inflection.

"Suimei-kun, there's just a little something I'd like to ask of you."

"I'm a bit busy right now. I'll have to wait till later."

"Whaaat? But I want it now."

Despite Suimei clearly being in the middle of something, Hydemary seemed ready and willing to force the issue. In response, Suimei turned to her and offered some candid advice.

"And I want to keep working. Think of me for a second, will ya?"

"No way. You should be the one thinking of me."

"You're the one who wants something! It's common freaking sense that you're supposed to be the one being considerate. Can't you compromise?"

"Isn't it because I can't compromise that I'm here making a request?"

"That's... Well, you do have a point, but..."

"Right? So just compromise with me. Life is a series of compromises, isn't it?"

Hydemary spoke in an extremely composed manner. There was no denying the truth in what she said, but such wisdom was hardly convincing coming from someone her age.

"A six-year-old shouldn't be giving me life lessons, damn it... Seriously."

"So, what do you say?"

“I dunno...”

Suimei still seemed reluctant, so Hydemary drew closer and looked up at him from below.

“...The hell are you doing?”

“I’m looking at you with upturned eyes. I was told it was a gesture that would bring down any man.”

Hydemary spoke with confidence in her sources, but this seemed to be her first time putting such knowledge into practice. Her completely deadpan face didn’t quite have the appeal she was hoping for. Yet she persisted nonetheless.

“Nobody’s falling for that,” Suimei sighed in exasperation.

“Actually, who the hell told you something so dumb?”

“Miranda-san from Usher’s Bar.”

“Ain’t he a guy?!”

Miranda was the transvestite shopkeep who ran a small restaurant at the foot of the mountain. Suimei would take Hydemary there every once in a while, and the two of them got along surprisingly well. Suimei wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. In any case, Hydemary still didn’t relent.

“Hey, it’s fine, isn’t it? You’re free anyway, aren’t you?”

“You have eyes! You can clearly see that I’m working!”

After shouting at her, Suimei turned back to his desk. When he did...

“Hey, hey...”

“No.”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey...”

“...”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey...”

“Alright already, damn it! Just shut the hell up! I got it, so stop fucking ‘hey’ing me!”

Suimei’s eventual downfall was Hydemary’s plan to throw off his concentration by being a noisy nuisance. Even if he’d tried to use magicka to do something about it, Hydemary was a magician who rivaled his abilities. One thing might quickly escalate to another, so Suimei begrudgingly consented in order to keep both them and the headquarters safe. Hydemary threw both her arms in the air to celebrate his capitulation, though she remained completely expressionless.

“Yay! That’s my Suimei-kun. Your unfortunate face isn’t just for show!”

“God, you insult me on top of everything else? What a...
Whatever. What do you even want?”

“Yes, about that...”

Hydemary became uncharacteristically bashful, seeming hesitant to say it. Finding this rather unusual, Suimei prodded her to continue.

“Out with it.”

“You see, I’d like you to be the experimental subject for my magicka.”

“...”

The only reply Suimei offered to Hydemary’s request was silence.

“Hey, are you listening? I want you to be my experimental—”

“Oh, I heard you. And I refuse. I’m *not* going to be a guinea pig.”

“Whaaat?”

“Don’t act surprised! The hell made you think I was just gonna happily agree to be your test subject?! The hell makes you think anyone would?!”

“Oh? I don’t think it’s anything that unusual.”

“This is magicka way off the right path, isn’t it?!”

“How rude. My magicka is not sinister.”

“I don’t even care!”

As Suimei continued to protest, Hydemary stepped closer.

“But it has to be you, Suimei-kun.”

“Yeah, I’d be flattered if you didn’t mean for a guinea pig. The answer’s still no.”

“Don’t say such selfish things.”

“I’m not being selfish!”

Suimei had been quite adamantly refusing for a while now, but Hydemary hadn’t backed down in the slightest. Rather than him not getting through to her, it felt more like she was just teasing him. And without one of them conceding, this conversation would likely continue in circles all day and night. So in order to move things along, Suimei volunteered to take the next step forward.

“Out with it. What kind of magicka is it really?”

“It’s that. You know, *that*.”

Suimei looked in the direction that Hydemary was pointing and spotted a large, rectangular box.

“That...? If I remember right, isn’t that the setup for a magic

trick to split someone in two?”

“That’s right.”

“And isn’t that the kind of magic trick where you need two people in the box to make it work?”

“That’s just it. That’s the crux of this experiment. I’ve developed a spell to enhance the trick so that only one body is necessary to— Ah! Suimei-kun, wait! Don’t run away!”

Before Hydemary could even finish explaining, Suimei fled the room as fast as he could.

Come One, Come All! The Yakagi Residence House of Horrors!

It was a well-known fact at this point that Yakagi Suimei had a penchant for being dragged into all sorts of trouble. There were plenty of cases where he would stick his neck out on his own, certainly, but after being summoned to another world, he’d gotten involved in something or other everywhere he’d been—from Astel to Nelferia, from Nelferia to the Saadias Alliance, and back again.

It didn’t particularly help that, no matter where he went, he inevitably ended up picking some kind of fight with whatever authority was in power. Really, the only place he still had amicable relations with was the kingdom of Astel. He’d made enemies in the other two countries he’d visited so far, but the king of Astel was in a similar position without a great deal of allies. Astel was also the country that had brought Suimei and the others to this world, so he had the longest standing relationship with the king there. It could be said that they’d come to an understanding of sorts. But even though Suimei was on good terms with the king, there were still a good many people involved in running the country that didn’t have such a generous opinion of him. Our story this time around is about precisely that.

It was also a well-known fact in Astel that when Yakagi Suimei was first summoned, he quite vocally refused to take part in the Demon Lord’s subjugation. On the surface, it was because he hadn’t received the Goddess’s divine protection and held no power. There were those that thought his refusal was quite understandable given the circumstances, but others not so much. They thought him gutless. A coward. They were the ones who’d summoned him against his will, but alas, the world was full of such hypocrites.

Moreover, what had become of Suimei after all that didn't sit well with them. They assumed he'd get his just deserts after allegedly being driven out of the castle, but when they came to find out that he was actually living peacefully in the Empire, it was a rather sore spot. He was in a land he knew nothing about with no connections or friends to rely on. By all reasonable estimations, he should have had a rather rough time adjusting and providing for himself. Yet nevertheless, he'd ended up quite well off. It smelled like some kind of bribery. Like perhaps some influential figure in the upper echelons of the Empire had taken him under their wing. And reading too much into things has a way of making people anxious, especially when they were already apprehensive to begin with.

But regardless of why it had happened, the result of consequence right now was that a certain noble had sent an assassin. Astel's King Almadious knew nothing about it, of course, and even Duke Hadorious had nothing to do with it. It was a different noble who felt a righteous indignation on behalf of their country, and had let that feeling run off the rails in the wrong direction. They were just spoiled and privileged enough that the moment the notion crossed their mind, they pulled out all the stops to put their selfish plan into action. Yes, *that* sort of noble.

This noble believed rather baselessly that Suimei had, in the time he spent wandering around Royal Castle Camellia as he so pleased, made contacts in the Empire. That that was why he'd left Astel, and that he couldn't possibly be up to any good.

In a sense, it could be said that the assassin this noble had hired was truly the unfortunate one in the situation. In the business of assassins, work was work. And as a mere protégé, this particular assassin had no reason to turn down the job. In fact, it was an exciting opportunity. So upon receiving his orders, he set immediately to work. Mistaking Suimei for a simple coward, he had no way of knowing that he was about to walk into a tiger's den. It was pitiable, really.

The current hour only made things more unfortunate. Assassins naturally operated under the cover of darkness. It was a different story in the modern era where lights were on and there were people out and about regardless of whether it was day or night, but here in this world with no electric lights and a considerably smaller population, night was the ideal time for an assassin to do their

work. But the same was true for magicians. And that important detail of course escaped the assassin, for he had no way of even knowing what magicians were.

After making it to the Empire and infiltrating the imperial capital, said assassin was currently in front of Suimei's base.

"How unfortunate for him..."

The whisper that escaped the assassin's lips was likely prompted by pity. Even if he was an assassin, he was still human. Even as a dealer of death, he still had feelings. His target, Suimei, had not only been summoned to this world against his will, it had all been by accident. Furthermore, he had no power of his own and would be completely defenseless. The assassin felt for him and understood why he'd declined the demon subjugation. So this job was nothing personal. The assassin had simply caught the eye of the overzealous noble who'd hired him. It was a dangerous proposition for someone in his position to cross such a powerful noble, so he'd felt pressured to accept. He had to act—to work—without letting his feelings get in the way. It was a common story.

And so the assassin shook off the emotions that lingered inside him and steeled himself as he stood before the door. As a cat meowed behind him, he got to work picking the lock. It was a commonplace mechanism that didn't offer much of a challenge for a professional, and the assassin easily made his way inside. Unlike houses in Astel, houses in the Empire usually opened into a corridor. Several doors lined the one in Suimei's house, and the assassin began pondering where best to start. Taking a habitual glance over his shoulder before moving on, the assassin realized the front door was open.

"I thought I closed it..."

As he muttered to himself, a cat poked its head in through the gap in the door. Without making a single sound, it just stared fixedly at him, making him feel strangely uncomfortable. Brushing it off, he turned to head down the corridor and spotted a large portrait of a woman decorating the wall. It was the sort of artwork one would expect to find in the house of a noble or wealthy merchant. Seeing it here felt somewhat strange, but even stranger still, the eyes of the woman in the portrait suddenly seemed to move.

That painting is staring at me...

That thought was his first real bad omen. It felt like no matter

what angle he looked at it from, the painting was looking right back at him. His confidence began to waver. Knowing he couldn't let himself get hung up on something so silly while on the job, however, the assassin hurriedly moved on. But as he stepped further into the hallway, the eyes of the portrait followed him in a glare.

“—?!”

Seeing the painted woman watch him go, the assassin's body stiffened up. Just what was going on? He didn't have time to sit and think about it, but it was truly unbelievable. Telling himself it was just his imagination, he moved to take another step down the hallway. And when he did, the portrait's eyes continued to follow him.

“Ugh...”

Was that a groan of fear, perhaps? The fact that the assassin didn't scream spoke to his professionalism, but it was quite clear he'd been stricken with fright. He couldn't help recoiling a single step. He was filled with such dread that he was momentarily sure he'd gotten lost in a funhouse or something. To make matters worse, he suddenly sensed something. He quickly whipped around to see the front door still ajar... and the cat from before still silently staring at him.

“Shit, shit, shit... What the hell is going on?”

His fear began to escalate into full-blown panic. Since there seemed to be no sign of magical enchantment on anything, his sense that something was afoot grew rapidly. He then started thinking he'd seriously stumbled into a haunted house. As fright won out over his sense of obligation to complete the job, he turned to retrace his steps. When he did...

“Daaaaaruma-san fell doooooown.”

He heard the voice of a young girl from down the corridor behind him where he'd just been looking. It made his heart skip a beat. Had he been found by one of the residents? He wasn't immediately convinced that was the case because of the oddity of the words he'd just heard. Maybe it wasn't someone talking to him at all. The assassin stood there frozen in fear for a moment, then slowly turned towards the source of the voice. What they saw was a delicately crafted doll standing down the hall looking at him. Other than the doll, there was nobody there.

“Was it... you?”

He knew there was no way it could be, but he couldn't help the

question that escaped his lips. Regardless, the doll didn't answer. The assassin stared at it skeptically for a long moment, but nothing else happened. His sense of dread reaching its peak, the assassin turned to flee the house. When he did...

"Daaaaaruma-san fell doooooown."

He heard the same voice from behind him once more. When he whipped around again to identify the speaker, there was still only the doll standing in the hallway. Was it... really her talking? The assassin was no longer sure it wasn't, and the dire need to escape seized hold of his legs. He immediately tried to run, but...

"You mooooooved! Now you're it!"

The voice said something different this time. He peered over his shoulder and saw that the corners of the doll's mouth were now curved upward into a smile. But that was the last thing he saw. His consciousness then sank into darkness.

Moments later, quiet footsteps approached from down the hall.

"My goodness, aren't you up past your bedtime?"

Suimei appeared from the darkness and looked down at the assassin with an exasperated expression. It needn't be said what happened to the assassin and the noble who sent him after that.

Learning to Become a Swordswoman

"I will become a swordswoman!" Mizuki had suddenly declared just a few hours ago.

Ever since coming to this world, she had been worried about her lack of power. And, after dwelling on it all this time, she'd woken up with a certain idea in her head this morning: if her magical abilities were weak, she could supplement them with something else. At least, that seemed to be her train of thought.

"Hah! Hyah! Hyah!"

In the garden of the inn where they were staying, Mizuki was swinging Reiji's orichalcum sword while shouting loudly. Since she'd taken the time to cast physical reinforcement magic on herself, she didn't seem at all bothered by the weight of the sword. But her form was terrible. Her shoulders were all over the place and she was leaning this way and that. It was obvious even from a distance she had no knack for the blade.

"Um, Mizuki..."

"What is it, Reiji-kun?"

“I think you’d have an easier time if you straightened out your back more.”

“Alright, got it! I’ll give it a try!” she replied enthusiastically, straightening out with a snap.

Upon lending Mizuki his sword, Reiji had promised to give her some pointers while she trained. She was earnestly listening to his advice as she took practice swings, but alas, it didn’t seem to be making much of a difference. Because...

“Raaaaah! Hiiiyaaaaah!”

After another few swings, Reiji swore he could hear a creaking sound and her posture went immediately back to how it was. However, it seemed Mizuki didn’t notice at all. She just continued swinging. This cycle had repeated at least a dozen times now.

“You know, Mizuki...”

“What’s up, Reiji-kun?”

“Well, I was thinking... Wouldn’t it be better if you stopped trying to use a sword, Mizuki? I mean, it’s dangerous.”

“It’s dangerous no matter where you stand on the battlefield, isn’t it? After all, if I was scared of danger, I wouldn’t have come along with you in the first place, Reiji-kun.”

“That’s fair, but...”

It sounded like he wouldn’t get anywhere with a roundabout approach. Worse yet, what he’d just said only seemed to fan the flames in Mizuki’s heart. Her practice swings became more intense—dangerous, even.

After that, Reiji tried several other ways to convince her to give it up, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. She was intent on swinging that sword. But while Reiji was racking his brains, Mizuki suddenly stopped.

“Phew...”

Taking a deep breath, Mizuki looked rather satisfied. But the important part—at least to Reiji—was that she’d stopped swinging the sword. He let out a sigh of relief.

“Now that I’m finished with practice swings, it’s time to start practicing killer techniques.”

“WHAT?! NO!”

“Huh? Reiji-kun, what are you yelling for?”

“U-Uh, Mizuki... by ‘practicing killer techniques,’ you mean what, exactly?”

“Killer techniques are techniques that kill, duh. Any self-

respecting swordsman has at least one! A good, proper killer technique! Now, here I go! HAAAAAAAAAH!"

With a shout, Mizuki hefted Reiji's sword high overhead and swung it downward. Relying entirely on her physical reinforcement magic, it was an incredible slash. For a moment, Reiji was truly impressed. But really only for a moment. The sword slammed right into the ground and buried itself there.

"Ack!"

Watching the tip of the blade cut into the ground, Mizuki must've thought she'd really done it. She immediately yelped.

"Mizuki, you..."

"Ah... Ah, oh, this? This is proof of the tremendous destructive force of my killer technique, the Anou Grand Slash! So you could witness a glimpse of its power, I intentionally hit the ground."

Despite her confident words, her eyes were darting about. She'd likely never given a single thought to what would happen if she swung down with all her might. After trying to bluff otherwise with Reiji, she yanked at the grip of the sword to try and pull it out of the ground. She managed eventually, and, as perhaps was expected at this point, proceeded to act like absolutely nothing had happened.

After hearing all the commotion, Titania came out into the garden in the midst of this. She took one look at Mizuki's wild swings and turned to Reiji.

"Pardon my asking, Reiji-sama, but what is Mizuki doing?"

"Oh, that? She suddenly said that she wanted to learn how to use a sword too."

"I see... But what is she doing?"

"Those are practice swings... More or less."

Titania hadn't even recognized Mizuki's movements as practice swings. Watching her from the sidelines, it looked more like she was performing some mysterious ritual from an unknown country.

"HIIIIYAAAAAH!"

Mizuki, who had noticed Titania's arrival, let out a deliberately loud shout in response to her badmouthing. She was doing her best to impress the two of them. And she seemed awfully proud of herself, but Titania observed all this with cold eyes.

"...You call those practice swings? Are you mocking the sword? If you swing it like that, you'll never hit your opponent. You really are mocking it, aren't you? Or perhaps the real mockery here is

you? Yes, a mockery. A terrible sham. A crying shame...”

“Tia?”

“Oh, don’t mind me! Ohohoho...”

Titania had been mumbling with a dark shadow over her face, but it disappeared instantly as she laughed brightly. Mizuki then stopped swinging the sword and began doing something else with it. Seeing this new, curious motion, Titania’s face grew stern again.

“Reiji-sama, what is Mizuki doing now?”

“I wonder... I thought she’d given it a rest, but it looks like she’s twirling the sword around in front of her or something.”

Mizuki had the tip of the sword pointed at the ground, but spun the blade to trace a sweeping circle in the air. Reiji felt like he’d seen this somewhere before. It was like something out of a historical drama...

“Ah, yeah. It’s probably the deadly full moon blade.”

“Deadly full moon blade”? Is that some sort of technique?”

“Mm. Right now, Mizuki is making circles with the sword, you see? That’s supposed to ensnare her opponent’s focus, allowing her to cut in while they’re distracted. It’s kind of like hypnotism with a sword, I guess.”

“Wha— That sort of technique exists?!”

Seeing Titania’s surprise, Reiji realized—to his horror—what he’d done. Since he’d explained something fictional with a serious face, Titania had taken him completely at his word. He tried his best to laugh it off.

“Haha, no, it doesn’t actually exist. It’s an imaginary sword style.”

“What? It’s not real?”

“Yeah, no way. Not at all.”

“Does Mizuki know that?”

“Of course. She knows it can never be done.”

“...”

Upon hearing those words, a shadow once more fell over Titania’s face. She then silently walked towards Mizuki, and stood behind her as she continued her strange practice.

“Tia, it’s dangerous to...”

Just as Reiji was trying to warn her, Titania kicked Mizuki’s legs out from under her.

“Hmph!”

“Hwah?! ”

Mizuki let out a rather comical cry as she fell to the ground. Reiji watched all this in confusion. But just as he was about to ask Titania what she was doing, she picked up his orichalcum sword that Mizuki had been using.

“What was that for, Tia?! I was practicing my killer technique!”

“As if somebody who just started swinging a sword today could use a killer technique! To begin with, ‘killer techniques’ are not just things you make up! They are an art you learn by earnestly, painstakingly practicing moves into sublime perfection! *That* is the true essence of a genuine killer technique! And so—”

“But killer techniques are where it’s at!”

“Silence! Who said that you could open your mouth?!”

“Eek!”

“Now, you sit right there and you stay there. Are you listening, Mizuki? First things first, know that becoming a swordsman is not something you accomplish in a single day. It is something you earn after pouring blood, sweat, and tears into countless days of training...”

Titania’s lecture continued for quite some time as Mizuki sat there on the ground looking up at her. Even though she was a mage, it sounded like she knew what she was talking about. Like there was an undeniable truth to her words. Naturally, as Reiji was also a relatively amateur swordsman, her scathing lecture was painful to his ears.

“Maybe I should also do some practice swings...”

Reiji exited the garden, muttering to himself. He thought Mizuki called for help as he walked away, but pretending that he’d heard nothing, he went to borrow a sword from one of Titania’s knights.

From that day forward, Mizuki no longer held any reckless notions about becoming a swordswoman.

All’s well that ends well.

The Most Evil of Indoor Monsters! Its Name Is...

On a certain day at Suimei’s base in the Empire, an incident occurred around noon. Suimei was examining some raw materials for his magicka in an interior room of the house when Felmenia came running in in an unusual fluster.

“Suimei-dono! Are you here, Suimei-dono?! A grave situation

has occurred!”

“What is it all of a sudden? You’re pretty worked up...”

“How could I not be?! Martial law! I officially declare martial law as of this moment!”

“Wuh?”

Hearing Felmenia’s odd proclamation, Suimei cocked his head to the side. He couldn’t parse what she’d just said. Martial law was normally instituted to stabilize deteriorating public order and handle uprisings or revolts. And since households were typically governed by majority rule in the first place, there was hardly a situation where something that extreme would ever be necessary.

Taking a good look at her, Suimei could tell that she had an urgent problem, but no idea how to handle the situation. Her eyes were darting about like she was at a frantic loss as to what to do. To say she’d lost her composure was an understatement. That was probably why she’d said something so bizarre.

And while Suimei sat there puzzling over Felmenia’s condition, Lefille came running in next.

“Suimei-kun! Where’s Suimei-kun?!”

“Oh, Lefi? You know, Menia just came in and told me she was declaring martial law. What’s going on?”

“Well, I didn’t hear anything about martial law, but I do understand her panic. This is a critical situation, after all.”

“A critical situation?”

“That’s right. Of all the crises that have befallen this household since we began living here, this is easily the worst.”

Suimei was unable to hide his bewilderment. Those words held a certain weight coming from Lefille. He immediately scanned the house for mana presences and used his magicka to take a quick look around, but didn’t spot anything that appeared to be dangerous in the slightest. Next, it was Liliana who came running into the room.

“Felmenia!” she shouted as soon as she entered.

“Lily! How did it go?!”

“I’m afraid... that the target... has escaped... into the kitchen.”

“Into the kitchen, you say?!” Felmenia yelled in surprise.

“This is bad... At this rate, all our food will be compromised,”

Lefille groaned with a severe expression.

“Wait, what? Can someone explain what the hell is going already?” Suimei asked.

“A monster. An extremely evil monster... has appeared,” Liliana

replied.

“Inside the house?”

“That’s right.”

“No, no, no, there’s no way... right? There couldn’t be a monster outbreak here.”

Since Suimei’s house and the area immediately surrounding it were kept under strict surveillance, there should have been no way a monster had appeared without him noticing. But according to what the girls were saying...

“Strictly speaking... it’s not a traditional monster. However, it is still... extremely evil. In this world, it is known... as an indoor monster.”

“Y-You don’t say... So, what kind of creature is it?”

Suimei posed his question with a raised eyebrow, and it was Lefille who answered him.

“It exudes a dreadful aura comparable to that of the demons. As far as appearance is concerned, you could even call it a winged demon...”

The other two girls were nodding their heads repeatedly in agreement, but this description only puzzled Suimei further. Felmenia, donning a bitter and solemn expression, took over the dramatic explanation from there.

“This monster, you see, possesses brown wings. It also takes to hiding in the shadows. From time to time, it will suddenly appear out of nowhere. And it seems to take a sick pleasure in consuming human food.”

“You don’t say...”

Putting together everything he’d heard so far, Suimei arrived at a conclusion.

“So, is this monster extremely nimble, by any chance?”

“Yes,” answered Liliana. “It very well may be... the fastest creature in all of nature. Even scholars... have suggested as much.”

“And does it make a terrible skittering sound when it moves around? Would you say it’s the enemy of all women... No, of all housewives?”

“That sounds exactly right. Could it be that you too know this monster, Suimei-kun?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

Indeed he did, for what the girls were describing sounded an awful lot like a cockroach. However, to think that they were so

reviled in this world that they were regarded as monsters... All three girls looked at him with pleading eyes, begging him to do something about the terrible abomination that had infiltrated the house.

“...Alright. I’ll do something or other about it.”

They then cheered for joy as though their prayers had been answered.

“That’s our Suimei-dono!”

“Suimei-kun is brave indeed. It’s said that even men fear this monster.”

“Suimei... How cool.”

Suimei never thought the day would come where he was treated like a hero for something like dealing with a cockroach. It left him with mixed feelings.

“...”

But just then, a certain doubt stirred in him. This was a different world, after all. There were plenty of mysterious creatures living here that defied all natural reason. He couldn’t deny the possibility that this wasn’t just any cockroach. Perhaps there was a good reason the girls were so terrified of it.

“Is something the matter, Suimei-dono?” Felmenia asked, concerned over his silence.

“No...”

All three of the girls, even together, had been unable to handle the threat. It was better to approach this situation cautiously. Holding on to that thought, Suimei anxiously stepped into the kitchen.

“Suimei-kun, it’s there! Right over there!”

“Suimei-dono, please defeat it quickly before it gets to the food!”

“It won’t be that big of a deal, right? I mean, it’s not like it’ll ruin it...”

“What sort of ridiculousness is coming out of your mouth?! If that thing so much as touches our food, we’ll have to throw it all out immediately! There will be no eating it! You couldn’t even wash it clean after that!”

“Nuh-uh-uh. Hang on here. Hold the phone. You’ve gotta be exaggerating...”

It’s not like he didn’t understand the feeling, but he really did think it was going a bit far. But as he stood there astonished at the

girls' continued nonsense, the cockroach on the floor began creeping towards them.

"I-I-It's coming this way!"

"S-Stay back! Stop making that disgusting sound with your disgusting little legs! Uwaaaaaaaah!"

"R-Retreat! Fall back!"

While raising hell, the three girls scrambled behind Suimei. After giving them a sidelong glance over his shoulder, Suimei turned to the cockroach with a somewhat tired expression on his face. Seeing it in person like this, everything became clear. He was quite literally stunned into silence. Meanwhile, all three girls were still shrieking and squealing. It was just a testament as to how much they feared this monster, but...

"It's so small..."

The cockroach in the kitchen was unexpectedly small. It was no bigger than an adult's thumb. In other words, it wasn't even fully grown. Suimei honestly didn't see the reason for all the fuss, and couldn't help thinking the girls had gone a little overboard.

"Hup!"

With a snap of his fingers, he used his strike magicka to exterminate the threat. And as the cockroach was crushed by the explosion of air, the girls raised celebratory cries of relief.

"You defeated it!"

"Thank goodness..."

"Evil must be vanquished... without exception."

Liliana thrust out her index finger at the squashed bug as if to make an example out of it. And so the squall had passed. As that settled in on everyone, Lefille began nodding in impressed approval.

"Suimei-kun really is amazing. Even before such a big one, you didn't falter at all."

"...A big one? That thing?"

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

It was clear they somehow weren't on the same page. They stared at each other, heads cocked to the side. Eventually, it was Suimei who broke the silence.

"You've gotta be kidding, right? That little sucker's just a baby."

"Certainly not. It has been a long time since I've seen one so large."

Hearing Felmenia say that, Suimei was dumbfounded. This had

gone past the point of ridiculous. He simply didn't even know what to say.

"Wh-Why are you going silent now?"

"I have... a bad feeling about this... A very bad feeling..."

"So, um, Suimei-dono, in your world..."

"Yeah, there are bigger ones."

"...H-How much bigger, exactly?" Lefille asked reluctantly.

Suimei held up his two index fingers side by side to approximate the size for her.

"I'd say a normal one's about this size."

"Impossible..."

"That's gargantuan! Normal humans would never be able to defend against those! This cannot be! You're lying!"

"I'm as serious as a heart attack."

Abject fear was visible on Lefille's face, Felmenia was shouting denial in all four directions, and Liliana's shoulders languidly drooped in defeated silence. They all fell into their own despair upon learning the terrible truth.

"Do all the denizens of your world battle against such monsters, Suimei-dono?"

"You could say it's an ongoing battle..."

Chances were that someone somewhere in the world was currently fighting a cockroach at this very moment. Pondering the nature of humanity's war with insects, Suimei began disposing of the felled cockroach.

"What the hell is even going on here...?"

The Most Evil of Indoor Monsters! Reiji Edition

Upon stumbling across a certain scene in their rented room in the self-governed state, Reiji had but one thought...

What on earth is everyone doing?

But rather than a question of urgency, it was primarily one of exasperation. For, you see, Titania and her knights were spread out across the room with their weapons drawn and at the ready. They were slowly closing in on a target they had encircled. And it was said target that was truly the cause of Reiji's exasperation.

"Ugh, to think you allowed such a foe to trespass here..."

Gregory, Roffrey, Luka! The enemy's movements are irregular! Stay vigilant and do not lose it!"

Titania's gallant and commanding voice rallied the others. It would have been a rather impressive thing to see in the middle of battle, or rather, to hear. Despite the bravery in her voice, she was shrinking back. It wasn't exactly an inspiring sight. Even her three knights were wavering. And with all of them standing there glued to the spot like they were, it looked like they were playing some sort of children's game.

But then the target went on the move. It drew nearer to Roffrey, who pitifully yelped in response.

"E-Eek!"

"Roffrey, keep it together! How can we call ourselves Her Royal Highness's escorts in such a state?"

Seeing the young knight panic, Luka scolded him. She was taking this dead seriously, which only amplified Reiji's exasperation. It was then that the senior knight, Gregory, took control of things.

"E-Everyone, protect the princess with your lives! We cannot allow that monster to reach Her Highness!"

Perhaps because of Gregory's shouting, the target began moving once more. When it did...

"Waaah!"

"It moved!"

The knights fell into a frantic uproar. With the situation quickly deteriorating, Titania made a bitter expression like she'd been driven into a corner.

"I-If it has come to this, then I will use my magic to..."

Before Titania could enact such violence in the inn, Reiji called out to her.

"Um, sorry to butt in while you're in the middle of something, Tia, but..."

"R-Reiji-sama?! I didn't know you were there... But please be careful! There is a monster in here!"

"..."

By "monster," she was referring to the target they'd encircled. As Reiji looked down, he set his gaze upon the primary cause of all this commotion—a cockroach. And a particularly small one at that. While it was still creepily moving its feelers, it was just sitting there on the floor for now.

Were these people genuinely afraid of it? Or perhaps they were trying to play a prank on Reiji? That was all he could think.

“Reiji-sama!”

“Mm, yeah, I can hear you. So, what’s up?”

“Did you not hear me?! I am saying that there is a monster—”

“Um, about that... How is that a monster? It just looks like a bug to me.”

“Do not be fooled! It is a monster that has threatened households since time immemorial! An abomination that strikes fear into the heart of man!”

“I mean, I know it looks gross, but I don’t think it’s actually hurting anyone...”

“Oh, but it will! It’s even said that a terrible disease can be contracted just from touching it!”

“A terrible disease, huh? Is that what they say...?”

There was no way that was true. As Reiji’s exasperation continued to mount, he heard Mizuki’s voice coming from behind him.

“Oh, Reiji-kuun! I heard shouting over here. What’s going on?”

“Ah, Mizuki...”

Mizuki slipped past Reiji standing at the door while humming, and immediately whipped around to stick her tongue out at him. She was being cute, but the situation being what it was, it didn’t improve Reiji’s mood any. Mizuki, however, was clueless as to what she’d just walked into, and Titania called out to warn her.

“M-Mizuki! Be careful!”

“Huh? About what?”

“Fall back! It’s dangerous here!”

Hearing the urgency in Titania’s voice, Mizuki took a look at her surroundings. Not seeing anything out of the ordinary, however, she only grew more puzzled.

“Ummm... What’s dangerous, exactly? I don’t see anything...”

“There’s no time to waste! Make haste and flee this place!”

“You want me to run away— Aaah!”

Mizuki spotted the cockroach midsentence. Her initial reaction was simply surprise, but then her shoulders began exaggeratedly trembling.

“...Hmph! You sure got some nerve to invade my territory...”

Mizuki began exuding a dangerous aura and a low, creepy laugh. Titania was bewildered by her sudden change in attitude. Seeing it, Reiji called out to her.

“H-Hey, Mizuki...”

“Leave this to me, Reiji-kun. It’s alright. I’m quite used to it.”

“Mizuki...?”

With no further response, Mizuki slowly left the room. When she eventually returned, she was carrying a large number of coins that she’d folded up into a cloth. She then used a string to seal the top of the makeshift bag so that none of the coins could come out. Seeing this, Reiji was reminded of a particular scene from a certain detective manga. The one where coins were stuffed into a sock to make an improvised blackjack of sorts.

Since they were short the staple arsenal of tools for dealing with such a threat—spray pesticide, flyswatters, rolled up newspapers, and the like—she’d likely chosen this as a substitute. It looked like she was planning on crushing the cockroach with it. Indeed, Mizuki wasn’t afraid of cockroaches. To the contrary, she was the type of girl to get rid of them herself upon discovering them. And once she’d finished fashioning her weapon, she sidled right over to it.

“R-Reiji-sama! If we do not stop Mizuki, then...!”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t worry about her. Not Mizuki.”

“No, we mustn’t allow her to get close to it! Please stop Mizuki immediately! She will contract a terrible disease!”

Or so Titania pleaded, but Reiji didn’t move. Meanwhile, Mizuki took in a deep breath, and...

“Get the hell out of my territory! EEEEEEEAAAAAAAAT THIIIISSS!”

The moment she locked eyes on the cockroach, she let out a valiant roar. She was telling it to get out, but she was fully intent on crushing it. Swinging her improvised weapon, she struck the floor repeatedly with a series of bangs. Witnessing the bloodcurdling sight of a mad warrior at work, Titania and the others were overcome with an indescribable sense of fear.

Needless to say, the cockroach didn’t stand a chance against her.

“Hmph... It’s over.”

After obliterating the cockroach, Mizuki turned an astoundingly triumphant smile on her companions. Seeing her like this, the three knights in the room began muttering.

“A-Amazing...”

“My god, to have defeated that monster so easily...”

“Does Mizuki-dono fear nothing...?”

It didn't take long for their fear to evolve into deep admiration. They looked up at her with ardent zeal like they would a true hero.

“I don't really get what's going on, but that was okay, right?”

“It was magnificent, Mizuki. I never knew you were so heroic... I am seeing you in a new light.”

Titania clasped Mizuki's hand firmly in both of hers. Her eyes too were sparkling with admiration.

“What? Naw... I've still got a long ways to go.”

“No, the dauntless courage you just demonstrated as you defeated that monster with your own hands was truly commendable. I shall follow in your example.”

“Monster? That cockroach?”

“Yes. It's especially praiseworthy that you could challenge one so large.”

“I dunno. It was kinda tiny.”

“Pardon?”

Titania sounded like she'd misheard Mizuki, but Mizuki simply replied...

“I mean, I've taken on groups 'em that size all at once before, you know? Compared to that, this was nothing. Nothing at all.”

Hearing those words, Titania and the others beheld Mizuki as if she were a god.

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The Magic in this Other World is Too Far Behind! Volume 6
by Gamei Hitsuji

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